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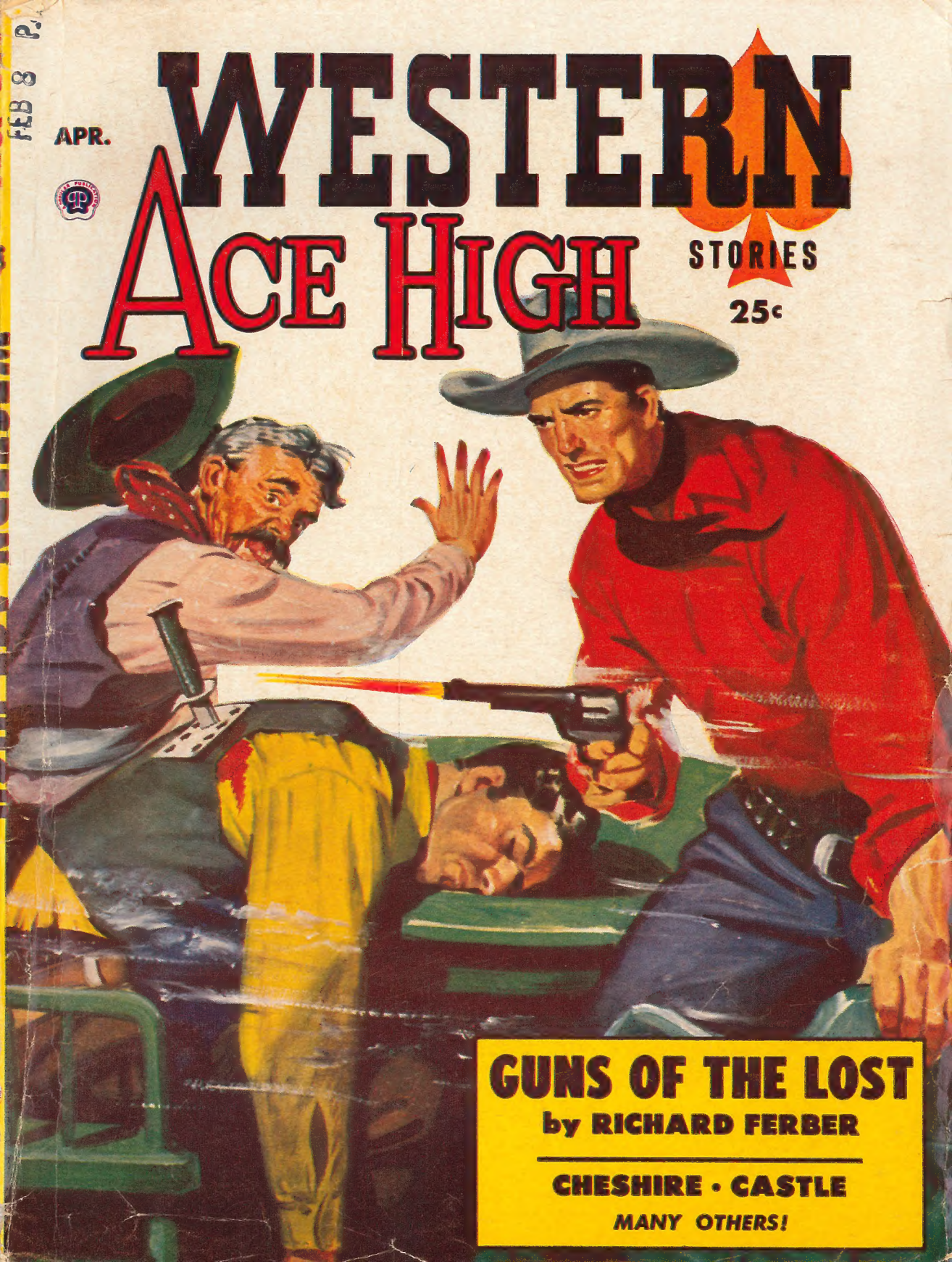

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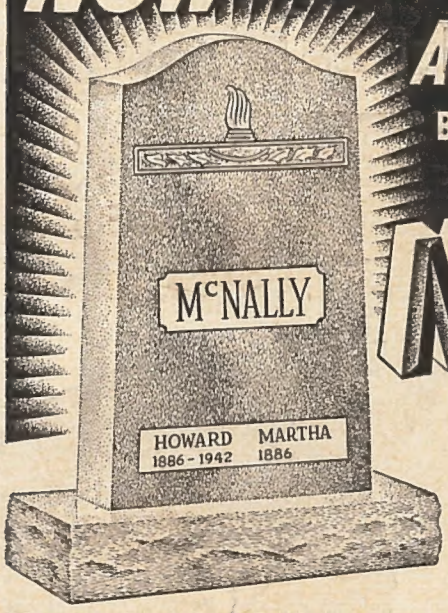

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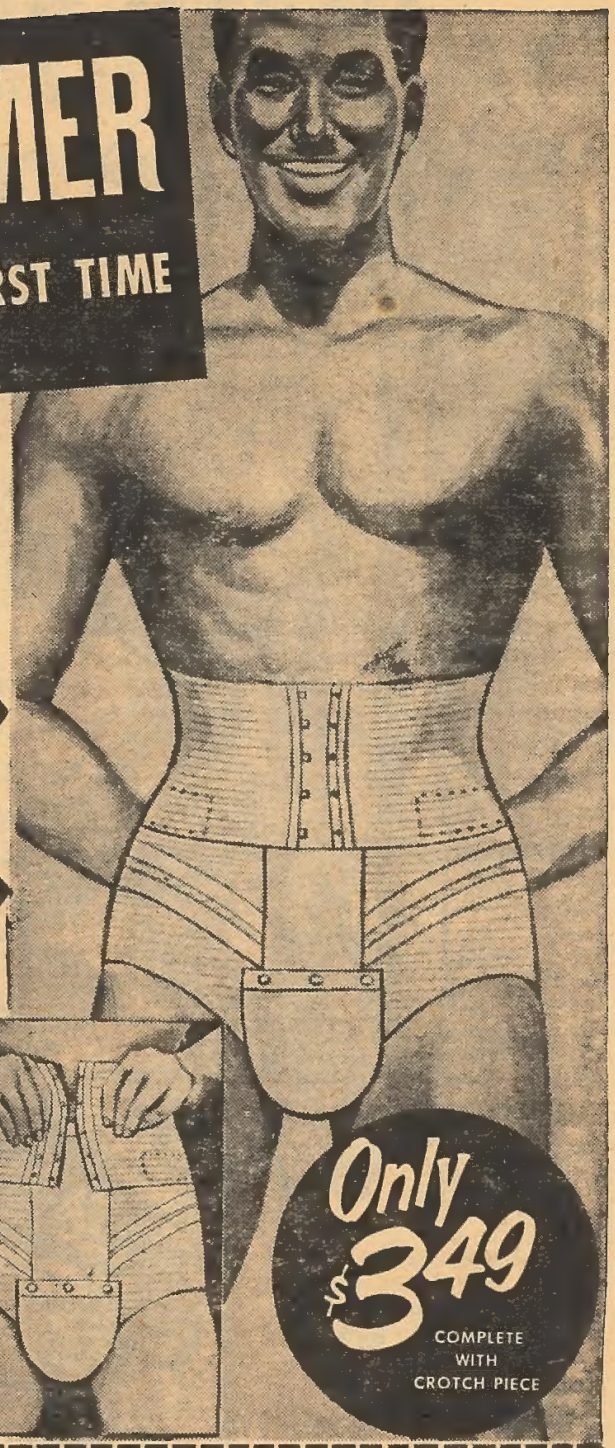

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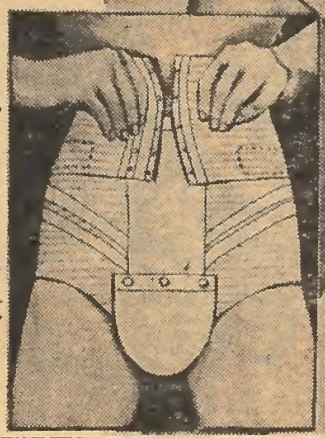

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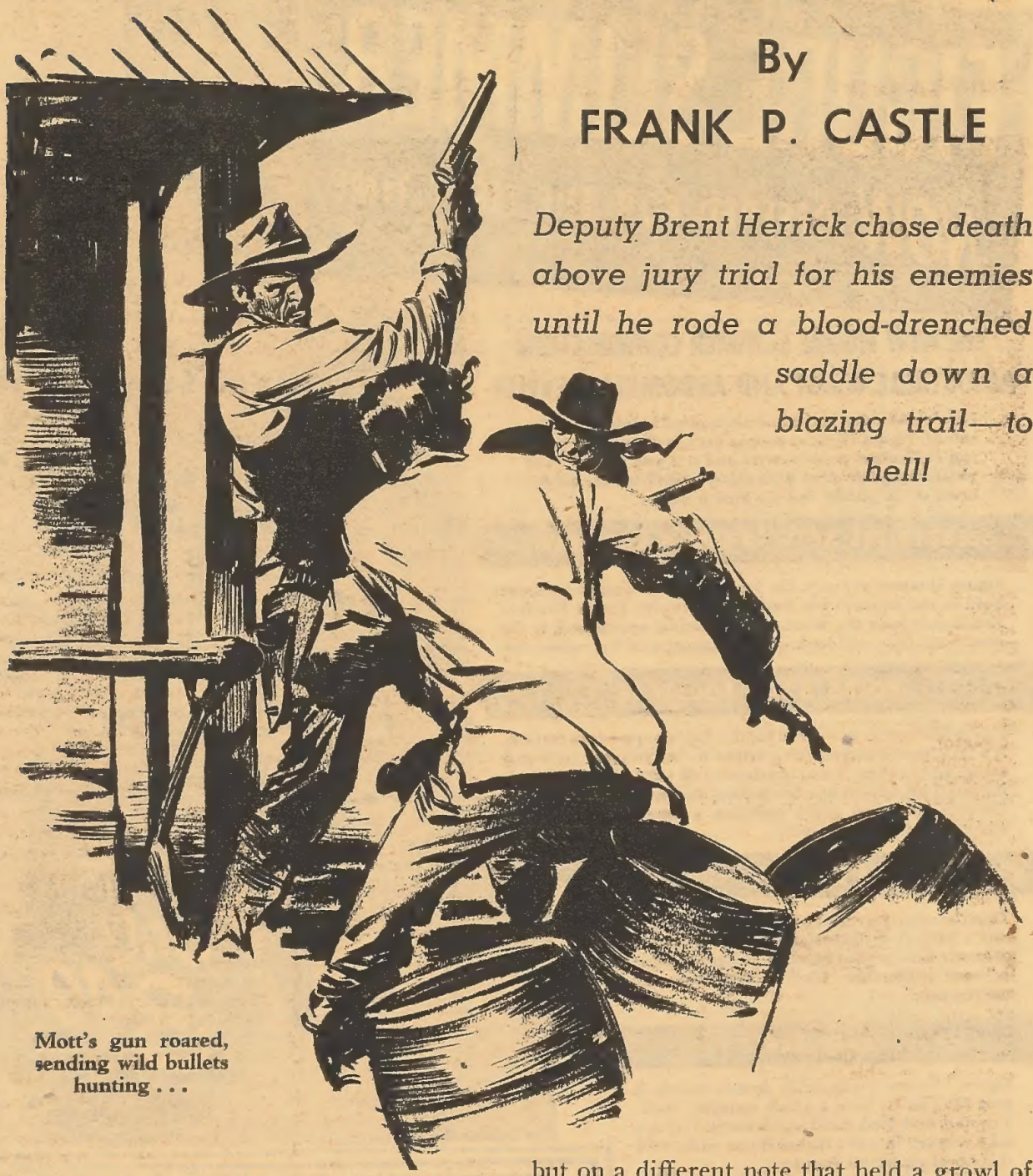
DEATH BE MY JUDGE

By

FRANK P. CASTLE

Deputy Brent Herrick chose death above jury trial for his enemies until he rode a blood-drenched saddle down a blazing trail—to hell!



Mott's gun roared, sending wild bullets hunting . . .

GIB HERRICK, sheriff of Magdalena County, Arizona Territory, sat at the desk in his small office on the ground floor of the courthouse, hands tightly clasped before him, listening.

A moment before, the late afternoon clatter and hum of Magdalena had died abruptly, succeeded by a moment of startled silence. Now the noise was beginning again, but on a different note that held a growl of fearful anger.

Monica Whelan came in, through the side door from the courthouse's main hall. She was a handsome, dark-haired young woman, the court clerk. Monica was pale; she moistened her lips and spoke huskily.

"Brent's back."

Gib nodded. "I guessed as much." It was the reason he was sitting here, hands

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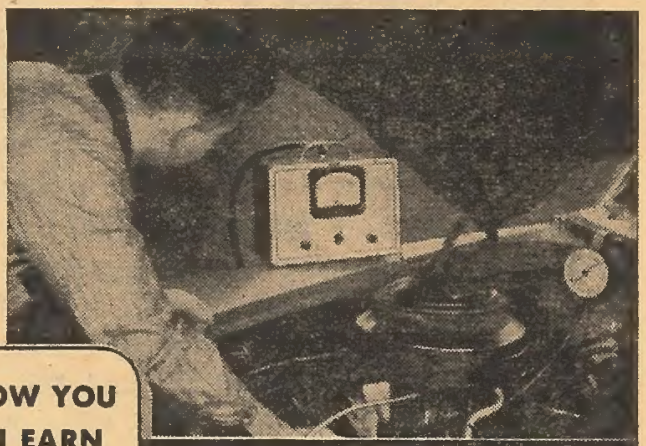

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VETERANS: Give Date of Discharge_____

(Continued from page 6)

clasped like a preacher about to say grace, the shakes in him—on account of Brent Herrick, his own son.

"He's coming back alone again," Monica said.

The noise had told Gib this. It had happened every time with the boy—no prisoners. Gib felt cold. Thirty years of honest, honorable law work behind him, and now this. It couldn't go on.

Gib saw the horses stop outside, three of them. Brent Herrick was up on one, a big young fellow, broad-shouldered and lean-waisted, good-looking—image of Gib. A son to rejoice a man, people had said. There was a deputy's star on his vest; he swung down and made his tie, while the crowd came up and gathered around, staring at the other two mounts.

Both showed empty saddles, a pair of boots tied to each saddlehorn, a shellbelt and holstered gun looped around it, other gear packed on behind. Somebody snapped a harsh question. Brent glanced at him without answering, and the man who had spoken fell back a step.

Brent came across the walk and through the door. His tired face lighted with a swift warm smile as he saw the girl. "Monny!" He put his hand lightly on her arm. "I rode hard to make it back for the school dance tonight. Still time to bid for the right to squire you?"

Monica hesitated momentarily. Then, "I haven't said yes to anybody else, Brent," she said, and turned and left.

Brent looked after her, showing a slight puzzled frown. It smoothed out as he turned to his father. Now he was an employee, speaking to his boss. "You can scratch Phil and Brud Welty from your records, sir."

"Guessed that," Gib said, throat dry and voice a little harsh. "Where did you catch up with them?"

"Marquez Rocks," Brent answered. "They ran before me for two days, trying to reach that malpais country on Salt Creek where their cousins hole up. I kept shoving them away, and they decided to make a stand. I got Phil at about a quarter mile when his shots marked where he was holed up. Brud was tougher, a shorter shot but ranging downhill in poor light. Too far to haul them back, in this weather; I buried both."

The harshness was still in Gib Herrick's voice, "Couldn't you have picked them up, brought them in?"

His son shook his head. "They fixed a trap to bracket me. Phil was in the rocks. Brud was back of the old stone watering trough at that ruined corral, below. It was coming dark and I was tired of chasing them, so I rode on in. Six shots from them; I triggered three. After Phil dropped, I yelled at Brud to quit. He wouldn't."

The picture Brent's quiet words had painted was starkly clear to Gib. His son riding between those two killers, knowing their guns were bearing right on him, letting them take their shots, marking their positions by the powder flashes, then going into action.

It told Gib he was facing either a man with more backbone and courage than any he had ever known—or a liar.

No prisoners, all those he had gone after dead and buried—this was the record Brent Herrick had compiled during his brief period of wearing that deputy's star. This was the reason the town and county feared him—a fear swiftly changing to hatred. Men lay in lonely graves in the wild corners of this big county, their horses and boots and gear brought back. Bets were made at the Ranchers' Rest that if the graves were found and opened, the men in them would have bullets in their backs.

"I'll go along, if you don't mind; need a bath, a shave and a change before the dance," Brent said.

"All right," Gib agreed.

The boy paused a moment, as though ex-

(Continued on page 10)

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(Continued from page 8)

pecting his father to say something more, a look in his eyes Gib had not previously seen—a questioning, puzzled look.

"Watch yourself," Gib told him.

"Why, of course," Brent said, sounding surprised. "I know those four cousins of Brud and Phil will try to even things."

"No gunwork if they hit town!" Gib said harshly.

A taut, strained moment—then Brent slowly nodded. "I'll see you at supper, dad."

He went out and up the street, silence surrounding him. A hostler from the Gem Livery looked inquiringly in, and Gib nodded; the hostler took the horses away.

Then Sam Marvin entered, mopping fat checks and multiple chins. Marvin, a town merchant and a power in county politics, settled himself in a chair, pursy lips quivering, pale blue eyes worried.

"You hear that crowd, Gib? It's gone far enough. If the fall election was tomorrow, I couldn't guarantee you more than your vote and mine. A little more, and the whole ticket will go down with you."

Gib swung his chair around, reached for his cane and got to his feet. "Because a pair of cheap, trashy killers who've caused the county endless trouble and grief will bother nobody any longer, Sam?" he said.

"Yes. And because of those buried before them," Marvin said. "Sure, the Weltys were trash. So are their cousins. I wouldn't weep if they were all in their graves. I'm not shedding any tears over the other dogs that died, either. But people are queer. They expect certain things of a lawman. You know that, Gib. One who hauls back dead men's boots instead of prisoners scares them. And—" he licked his lips, "he scares me, too!"

Gib tested his leg. It ached. Another week before he could sit a saddle, the doc had said.

This was back of all the trouble—his leg, with a bullet in it thrown by a drunk freighter on the prod, plus the fact his chief deputy had been called east for a family funeral. The hard, grinding work of upholding the law from a saddle in Magdalena County had fallen to Brent Herrick.

And it had been a troublesome spring, with more killers ranging the brush than at any similar time Gib could recall.

Not many were on the loose any longer. Most were dead, Brent's work.

"The meanest killer that ever lived gets sympathy if he dies from a bullet in the back," Marvin said.

"Don't talk back-shooting to me, Sam," Gib said grimly. "I won't take it from anybody."

"I'm only telling you what's common gossip. Some uglier things are being said, too."

Yes. Gib knew.

It was bitter now for him to remember how anxious he had been about Brent, when the boy first went law-riding into the wild back country.

He had been reluctant to appoint him deputy, seeing Brent with a father's eyes when he came along after a dozen years in Wyoming with his dead mother's folks, thinking him still pretty immature, even at twenty-four. That he could ride and shoot was evident quickly; his marksmanship and speed had startled Gib. And Brent had wanted to follow his father's trade. Gib reluctantly agreed.

Now, he tried not to think of the few he had known who had worn badges and profaned their trust—men clever at making captures and leaving prisoners dead.

People said Brent had a taste for killing, for indulging it legally against outlaws on the run; soon it might flare murderously against any man who stood in his path.

"Speak your piece, Sam," Gib said.

"You've got to take back his badge," Marvin told him.

"I'll sooner hand in my own!"

Marvin lifted his bulk from the chair.

(Continued on page 12)

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(Continued from page 10)

"Better think it over. Me and some others have been figuring on you as state senator. Take the badge and send Brent back to Wyoming, Gib."

Brent did not show up for supper. Gib ate alone. He was smoking a tasteless cigar, afterwards, on the front porch, when Monica Whelan approached.

She was dressed for the dance. Her dress was new, subtly emphasizing her slim figure, discreet in its revelation of pretty arms and shoulders. There was strain in her voice.

"I knew Brent wouldn't be home yet, Gib. I wanted to speak to you. You probably haven't heard yet about my reason for coming. The barber on the north side of the plaza asked Brent to take his trade elsewhere when Brent went in for a shave."

Gib swore under his breath and reached for his cane. "Might have guessed that would happen—a brash fool baiting him for the sake of making brags later to other fools. What did Brent do?"

"He backed away, without a word, and went to the Mexican shop down by the Ranchers' Rest," Monica said.

To that extent at least he had been mindful of his trust, Gib thought, instead of making the barber eat his insolent words, he had accepted them in silence.

"I think the barber behaved as he did because he thought the talk around town was true, that you're going to take Brent's badge and send him back to Wyoming," Monica went on.

"The talk is wrong," Gib growled, and started toward the steps, dragging his stiff leg. "But I'm going to put the clamps on this town!"

Monica grabbed him. "No, Gib!"

He stared at her. "What do you mean?"

"I want you to sit down and do nothing!"

Gib's brows ran together in a frown. He hadn't expected this. Didn't Monica mean to stand by Brent?

Faint music came from the schoolhouse, two blocks away. Monica was pale in the twilight. Gib said heavily, "I've been hoping that you'd soon move into this house, with Brent. It's been mighty lonely ever since the boy's mother died—"

Monica lowered her head. "Oh, Gib, I —I've hoped that, too—"

"Well, we can both forget it, now," Gib growled. "You run along. I'll make your excuses to Brent."

It seemed clear enough to him. The whole town knew his son had been courting her—an embarrassment, now, to Monica; she wanted no part of a man the town feared and disliked.

Monica caught her breath. She spoke, voice low and tense, "Please don't mention this to Brent!"

Brent came through the gate. He wore a new suit, with a long-tailed coat. He stopped, studying them with a puzzled, questioning look. Monica hurried to join him.

"We've missed at least three dances," she said, turning him toward the gate.

"Sorry, honey," he said.

"Gib, remember what I said!" Monica called.

He couldn't sit still, not with anxiety gnawing in him. Gib limped presently to the corner, then went up Cochise Street, past the courthouse and a few stores toward the school.

Many rigs and saddle-mounts were along the street and Gib stopped in the thick shadows of some willows to watch.

He saw Monica's slim figure silhouetted by light from inside. Brent was with her. The two talked briefly. Brent offered Monica his arm. She visibly hesitated, then accepted it, stepping down to the ground with him. They strolled across the front of the schoolhouse in moonlight.

Gib saw a group of loafers shift around to watch them. The crowd began to break up, men detaching themselves and easing

(Continued on page 14)

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(Continued from page 12)

into the shadows under trees in the schoolhouse yard.

Gib Herrick swore. He started limping hurriedly. He reached the yard just as the trouble started. It was triggered by a taunt from someone in the shadows, a man eager to brag that he had been first to name Brent Herrick as "You damned back-shooter!"

Gib tried to move faster. He could not see Brent clearly but heard Monica's voice, "Behind you, Brent!"

"I see them," Brent said. "Whoever said that, come out and face me plain."

"We'll all face you, you tin-star killer!" somebody yelled.

There was a rush of snarling voices, a scuffle of driving boots, a fist chunked against flesh and a yelp. Monica cried something in breathless anger.

Under the trees in the yard Gib could see a struggling group. It looked like five or six against Brent. They were crowding the boy, grabbing at him, jostling each other in their eagerness to drive their blows. Monica was down on a knee; she had been knocked aside when they rushed Brent.

Gib swung his cane. It hammered against a head and a man yelled. The cane whistled again; this time it cut a face. A hulking oaf came at Gib, fist rising in a wicked blow. Gib turned to take it against his shoulder; in the same motion he slid his hand down the cane and rammed its curved grip into the mouth of the fist-slinger.

The fellow floundered aside with a mushy whimper. Gib recovered his hold and used the cane again as a lash, laying it across the shoulders of another man.

"You damned fools!" he roared. "Get out of here!"

They went before him, scattering across the yard, a stumbling, cursing bunch. The pain in Gib's leg made him stop.

Brent was standing with feet spread, breathing hard, a rasping sound in the deep quiet. The music had stopped at the schoolhouse, and a crowd jammed the doorway, looking on.

"Boy, go home," Gib said.

"No," Brent said. "And I want to know what that fellow meant, calling me a back-shooter."

"Go home," Gib repeated. "That's an order. Move!"

Monica was on her feet again. She did not speak. Brent's gaze fell away.

Gib limped over to the schoolhouse porch. "Excitement's over," he announced. "Get that music started."

Monica came to face him. Her dress was torn and dirt-smeared.

"Gib, I wish you had listened to me," Monica said. "I wish you hadn't interfered."

"Should I have stood still and let him add another tally here in town?" Gib asked.

The music was rising again. Monica continued. "I don't think you know your son, Gib. I didn't either, not entirely, until those men swarmed at him. But I had guessed what he was, and now I know I was right—I wish you had stayed home!"

"Girl, you don't make sense," Gib said roughly, and left her. Monica came after him, putting a hand on his arm.

"I'm going with you," she said. "This must be settled, tonight."

A voice hailed Gib as he started to leave.

"Gib! I'm sure glad I found you quick!"

It was Sam Marvin, taking off his hat to mop his bald head.

"Those other four Weltys are in town, at the Ranchers' Rest, saying Phil and Brud got back-shot and they're here to even matters with your son." Marvin's voice rose stridently. "If he guns each of them, no matter where the bullet hits, the lid will blow off. You and me, we'll be out on a limb, with no place to jump! Take his badge and start him travelling!"

"Don't tell me my business, Sam," Gib said, voice brittle. "I'll see the lid stays on."

(Continued on page 16)

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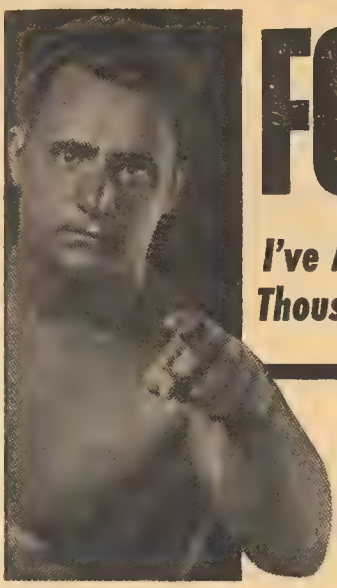

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(Continued from page 14)

He shook off Monica's arm and started away.

Sam Marvin yelled after him, "You'd better handle it right! There's those who are talking of taking your badge, too—and I'll help them if you don't get rid of that killer!"

Gib did not answer. Monica followed him. He did not speak to her, either.

At the little frame house on Tonto Street, Brent stood in the middle of the front room. His new suit was tattered and dirty. There was a bruise on his cheek, a dark rivulet of dried blood on his chin.

"I've been thinking," Brent told his father quietly. "Should have done it before, but I've been too busy with the jobs you've handed me. I know now why people have been showing me hateful looks, slighting me, why I was called a back-shooter tonight. They've been figuring I didn't give the thieves and killers I chased any chance at all—that I murdered them."

"Boy, I only came to tell you to stay here," Gib said heavily. "We'll talk later. Right now, I've got a chore to do."

"What chore?" Brent asked. Gib did not answer, turning back toward the door. Monica said, "The other Weltys are in town, Brent. They're gunning for you."

"The Weltys, eh? And you meant to handle them, dad. But that's my chore, not yours."

"I said you were to stay here!" Gib told him roughly. "Marvin had it right—you do any of your fancy shooting tonight, this town will blow up! Stay here and don't put your hand to a gun!"

Brent's hand gripped Gib from behind, pushing him aside. "You're the one who's staying here; you're not tackling those hardcases on that game leg," he said. "I'll take care of them. It's time to prove something to you, and to everybody in this town!"

He was gone, across the front porch and down the path to the street at a light, fast step. Gib started after him. "Brent, come back!"

It was no use. The street was quiet and empty by the time he hobbled onto the porch. Gib Herrick had to grab at a post and hang fast to it for a moment. He gathered himself and went on, down the path and through the gate, hitting the ground hard with his cane. If his infernal leg didn't buckle under him, he might make it to the Ranchers' Rest in time.

Monica called after him, "Gib, he has to do it himself! Don't you understand that yet?"

Then she came after him with a whipping rustle of skirts. He moved faster.

There was an idle hum of talk coming from within the Ranchers' Rest. Gib halted across the street in front of a feed barn. Maybe he had gotten here in time.

Monica caught up with him. He had moved fast, and her long skirts had hampered her. Gib put out an arm to halt the girl.

"Stay here," he said. "Don't know what happened to the boy, but it's plain he hasn't gone in there yet. I'll cross over and send those Weltys home before he does."

"Gib, wait—please!" Monica begged.

He turned on the girl. "Wait? For what? I've seen what he can do with his guns; one or more of those Weltys will be for burying, sure as pitch is hot, if he walks in that saloon! Maybe all four of them!"

"Especially if he goes around back and in through the rear, hitting them from behind? You can't help thinking that, can you?" Monica said raggedly. "But he won't! He told you plain what he meant to do. You weren't listening, Gib, and you weren't even looking at him."

"Time's past for talk," Gib said, and started to walk.

"There's something more you're going to hear," Monica said. "Brent doesn't have his guns! He checked them at the schoolhouse, and they're still there!"

(Continued on page 18)

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(Continued from page 16)

Gib said unbelievingly, "No!" But even as he spoke, he realized it was the truth. In the schoolhouse yard, Gib had had everything figured backwards. He had thought those skulking loafers only brash fools, trying to jump and down the boy before he could clear a gun against them. But they had known Brent wasn't armed; they wouldn't have dared take the chance otherwise.

Now Gib realized what Brent meant to do here, and turned cold inside.

A second later, the boy's voice came from darkness, across the street. It held the ring of steel, "I'm here, you Weltys! Come on out!"

It was a challenge that could not go unanswered, after the talk the Weltys had made. Gib hurriedly lifted his long-barreled .45 and took a step into the street, forgetting his cane. His abused leg buckled and he sprawled full-length in the dust. From that prone position he saw what happened next.

Two men came through the batwings, moving fast. They stopped on the walk, back to back, so they could watch all ways at once. Each man held a gun. Gib heard Mott Welty mutter something in profane urgency to his cousin Sig and they crabbed away from the light of the swinging doors. It was a wrong move.

Brent appeared, he had been behind a pile of empty beer barrels. He was crouched low and moving fast, toward Mott. Mott started a yell. It was chopped off by a wicked chunking sound. Mott's gun roared, sending a bullet through the saloon's wooden walk awning. Mott crashed down hard.

Sig Welty spun around, boots scraping frantically. He fired wildly, twice. One shot took out a dirty saloon window. The chunking sound came again, and Sig went down.

Gib came to his feet. Monica grabbed at his gun-hand. "Brent has to finish it, Gib!"

He grunted, understanding now, and holstered the .45. He limped across the street. Brent was now a taut, wary shadow against the front wall of the saloon. Brent spoke, low, but with a snap in his voice, "It's all my fight, dad!"

"I'm here just to cover for you, boy," Gib said mildly. "Keep your eyes peeled. Those two you rocked to sleep, they were stupid, rushing out. Ern and Linc will play it smarter."

"I know."

"Watch that far corner!" Gib said.

Ern Welty came around it fast. But Brent was on him before he could use his gun. The two crashed together and swayed toward the saloon doors. Linc Welty slid through the batwings, gun dancing nervously in his fist. "Hold him steady, Ern, and I'll plug him!"

Brent twisted and threw Ern Welty at his brother, then leaped at both of them.

Sig, one of those who had been laid out, dazed, on the walk, swore raggedly and started to rise. He was up to hands and knees when Gib Herrick reversed his cane and clubbed its grip against Sig's bull neck. The big man hit walk splinters with his face again.

Gib watched the fight that raged on the walk before him. Brent fought with cold, explosive fury, lashing his fists in short, straight punches, staying close to both men, nullifying their efforts to swing gun barrels at him or pull triggers. And every time his fists struck, that strange chunking noise sounded again.

Ern Welty staggered out of the melee, reeled drunkenly and tried to sight his gun at Brent. Gib's cane slashed his arm; he yelped and dropped the gun. Another swipe of the cane drove him back. Ern stumbled into a blow that slammed him against the front wall with a force that shook the saloon. Ern Welty slid down to a sitting position and was through.

Brent now had only one of them to contend with—and Linc, his face looking as

(Continued on page 108)

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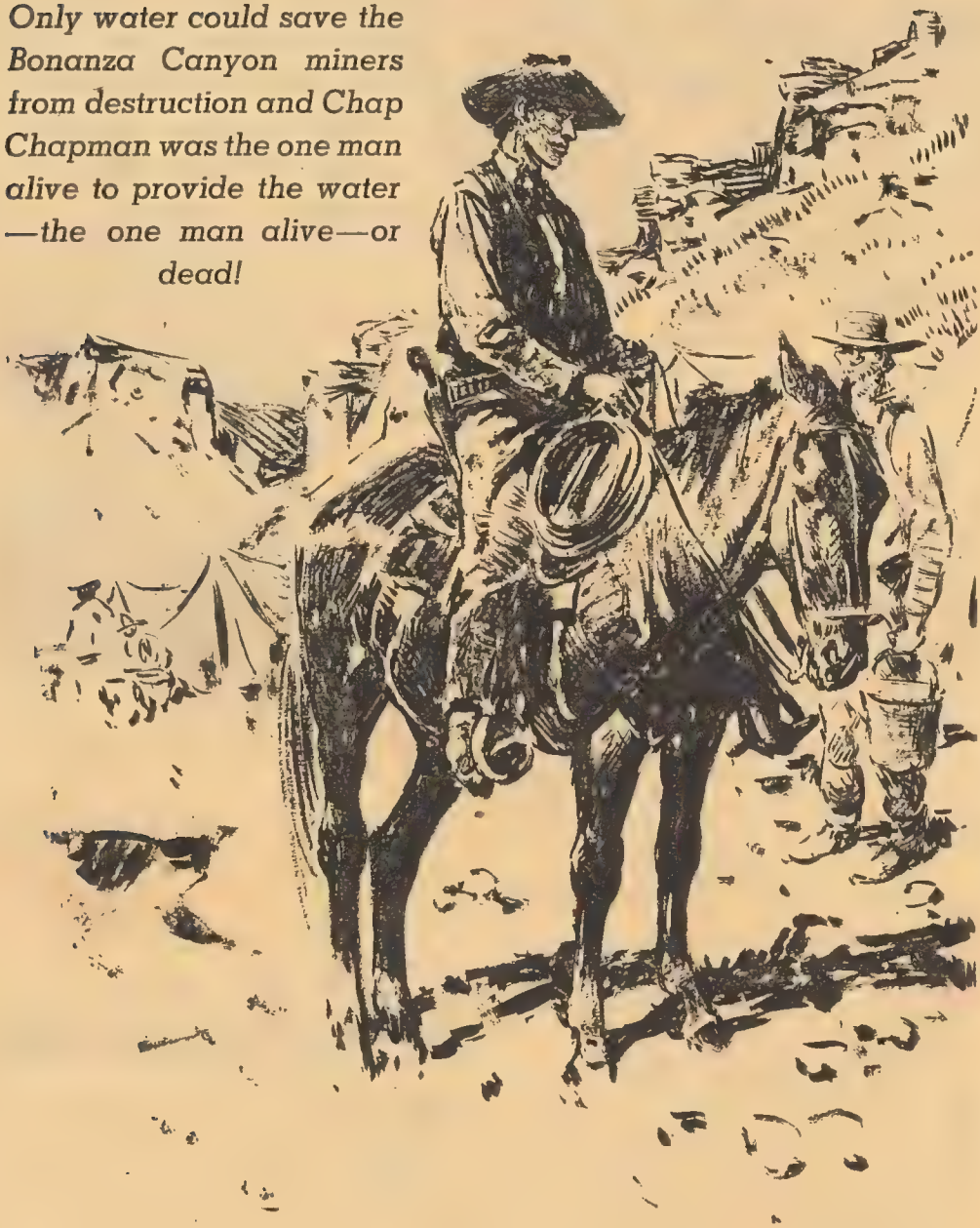
CANYON OF

Only water could save the Bonanza Canyon miners from destruction and Chap Chapman was the one man alive to provide the water —the one man alive—or dead!



By

GIFF CHESHIRE

THE DAMNED

. . . he could feel the unabating hostility of Connie Racine all the way . . .

THE WIND in the pine was like the sound of a hand on silk, and this made him think of the woman. Maybe he would see her in Bonanza City and maybe he wouldn't. That wasn't the reason for this ride into danger. The peril alone was why he had thrown a saddle onto his horse and started down the seven miles of the Tunnel Creek canyon. He had been warned that he could not enter the mining camp at the bottom and return to the Half Moon—his cattle spread back in the foothills—without fighting for his life.

So he'd come, and maybe he'd get a haircut, a couple of drinks and show his con-

tempt for the miners. Maybe he would see the woman—Lorinda Luce, and that would be a dividend. Maybe he would make the fight.

The canyon as yet was a gash cut in the tangled hills of Nevada. The tortured road that was the only thoroughfare to Half Moon and Sky-Hook, its neighboring ranch, hugged the bed of a creek now dry. And there was the trouble. The miners were reaping the fruits of improvidence and lavish waste. Now they had no water for their placers and were blaming their betters, centering their bitter hostility on Chap Chapman.

Around a tight horseshoe bend of the creek the canyon broadened. Chap found himself scowling forward against the dirty tents and flimsy brush shacks of what for less than a year had been called Bonanza Canyon. Placer gold had been found here the summer before, the news of it broadcast by fall, and overnight five thousand miners had poured into the foothills. Now they were that many enemies of Chap Chapman and his few cowman neighbors.

After the first widespread scourge of prospecting, the miners had concentrated their activities in Bonanza Canyon. At its lower mouth was Bonanza City, new but already stinking from its accumulated rot. The whole was now at the mercy of Chap Chapman, and this was a kind of bitter satisfaction in him.

This upper section of the mining activity, which he now entered, was the shirttail end of the operations, the richer claims lying farther down. He passed the first shacks and tents without causing any great stir of interest, although he saw several bearded, battered men give him a quick and scowling second look.

At the end of this nodule, the canyon pinched in again. He rode past the cleanest tent of all. His lips pinched tighter for, of the shoestring operators, the girl who lived in the tent was the most hotly vocal of them all. He thought he would get past undetected and had come abreast the open tent flaps before he heard her call.

"Chapman—wait a minute!"

He pulled down his horse, swung it and waited there. She stepped out of the tent, a slim, trim figure in a boy's shirt and bibless overalls. Her skin was brown as a hickory nut, two shades darker than her hair. She might have been pretty, Chap thought, if she had a woman's mind and ways and feelings.

Coming up to him, she spoke with less hostility than he had expected, staring up at him intently out of deep brown eyes. In a kind of desperate despair she said, "When will you let us have a few drops of that water you've stolen? We've come to a standstill down here. We can't do a thing till you help us."

Chap told her irritably. "Recollect explaining to you that I've stolen no water? When will you get that through the knot you call a head, Connie Racine?"

"Oh, I know," Connie said bitterly. "You built that dam before we ever heard of this canyon. Just the same, the creek is a natural resource. You've got no right to hog it."

"Hog, hell!" he snorted. "Every drop of water behind that dam now is run-off from last winter. But for the dam, it would have gone hell ahikin' down the country months ago. You know that. You could have followed suit and built you a dam below it last winter. But, no. You were all too blamed busy trying to dig a fortune out of the ground. Now you got neither fortune or water. And you're trying to relieve your bellyache by blaming me."

"Bellyache?" she cried. "Is that all you think it is?"

"Besides all that," Chap insisted, "it's not all my say whether the gates are opened for you people. I only own a fifth interest."

"But you're the ringleader," she said, her gaze cutting at him like driven sand. "We talked to the others when we realized how hard-headed you are. They said you

run the works up there—that it was up to you."

"If they said that, it was because they knew I'd keep telling you no smoke. I'm sorry that you're in a tight, sure enough. But I can't help you. You know that three of those partners have got their spreads on the lower creek, below Bonanza City. I can't put water through to them, even, because you miners would divert and waste it. Them lower ranches have been reduced to wells, which are about played out. Now I've got to board a good part of their stuff till fall rain. And I don't see a mite of sympathy in your eyes about that."

Connie Racine drew a breath that pleasantly swelled her shirt. "What you don't understand is that none of us here in the upper canyon got here soon enough or has done well enough to afford waiting for winter to come again. There's at least a dozen of us that will have to throw up our claims. You know that. They've got to be worked or they become vacant by law."

Chap flung a scowling look about and said, "Me, I wouldn't mind seeing this canyon vacant at all." He rode on. He was simmering, but also he was a little moved. He knew that her plight was desperate, and if there was something he could do without endangering the five different herds in the country, he would. But gold would keep where living flesh would not, and that was that.

NO ONE else tried to stop him as he threaded on down the long canyon. But he could feel the unabating hostility all the way. Bonanza Canyon—the name the moonstruck miners had given the canyon—gave Chap a grim relish. Bonanza meant wealth without end. But mining had gone on in the southwest long enough to demonstrate the need of an opposite term. Borrasca, which meant the end of flimsy hopes and dreams. They would change it here before the long, hot summer was over. Borrasca Canyon and Borrasca City, and then it would be cow country again.

He was not a vicious or a vengeful man by nature. The stampede had ruined a hard-wrought grazing setup, whose establishment had taken the grueling work of years. He could speak of years although he was still a shade short of thirty, a lean, stern-faced man who was most at home where the surroundings were the wildest. It had been to his taste here until the previous fall. He and Bulldog Jones ran the two ranches up in what was called The Hole. They had cleaned out the outlaws that had made it their headquarters and they had defied the waspish Paiutes. Now Half Moon and Skyhook were going concerns, while on the juniper flat below the canyon were the little outfits run by Sam Bourne, Zeb Miller and Rhino Jenkins. The five had pooled resources to build a crude earth fill at the upper canyon mouth. It had worked slick as a whistle until the mining population had intruded . . .

Daylight had faded when the canyon debouched to show Chap Bonanza City. It was a huddle of tents, tar paper or log buildings raised up on a sagebrush flat. Where cattle had grazed a year ago there were now mercantiles, hotels, a dozen saloons and bagnios, a bank, a stage and freight line. He rode onto the camp's rough street with a touch of deep foreboding.

It was a walking camp, few of the miners owning horses, so that he had to go half the length of the street to find a hitchrack he could use. Swinging down, he left his horse and stepped onto the plank walk, flinging a frowning study about him.

He had no express purpose in coming here except for the inexorable drive of pride and independence. Now his mind made an impulsive decision. The mining district had its own alcalde, Joe Dupont, elected to govern legally in the fastness of these desert hills. Yet, as in many such places, the real ruling power had no legal status. The kingpin here, Chap knew, was

Monty Beaumont who ran the Nugget Saloon and pleasure palace. Chap decided to wash the dust from his throat in the Nugget. It was the hotbed of resentment against him.

The saloon was packed although at this hour it ordinarily would be otherwise. When they could work on their claims, the miners did not start streaming down the canyon until after the supper hour. Now they were not working because they had no water for their sluices. It was apparent instantly that Chap Chapman was the notorious cause of that situation. Worse than in the canyon, the hostility was a thick miasma here. He passed through the swinging doors and made his indifferent way to the bar.

The bartender gave him a surly look but did not refuse to serve him. He brought Chap a whiskey and Chap nursed it, waiting for somebody to start the inevitable argument.

He had not long to wait. He heard a stir of interest behind him, and a glance in the back-bar mirror showed him a miner coming up. A big one. The man tapped his shoulder and spoke roughly.

"Chapman, you ain't welcome here. Get out."

Chap put down his drink and turned slowly. While understanding the man's motives, he did not like the look of the man himself.

Mildly, he said, "I'm drinking, friend. Don't bother me."

"Get out," the miner said.

Chap knew that it had to be settled fast and finally or he was in real danger. Without apparent preparation, his fist drove out. It caught the big miner in the middle of the belly. The man grunted and stepped back, recovered and rolled his shoulders forward. He struck two blows coming in. Then Chap's lashing fist made contact with the bewhiskered chin. The man snorted and, that time, hit the sawdust floor.

The watchers had pulled back to make room, expecting more. Now they hung there, their eyes warning Chap of their wish to tear him apart. They might have tried it but for a stir of interest at the rear of the room. Chap was aware of a hush that created a sense of expectancy. He didn't know what had caused it until he saw a man coming through.

Chap repressed a cold smile. It was Monty Beaumont, drawn by the commotion and coming on in annoyed, purposive strides, a stocky man whose black hair was snowwhite at the temples. The gambler was neatly, expensively but quietly dressed. His manner even now was courteous.

"Nobody ever took you for a coward, Chapman," he said softly. "And hardly for a fool. You're apt to be lynched. Take a word of friendly advice and go."

"Thanks for the warning, but I'm having a drink," Chap said.

Shrugging, Beaumont said, "Then come into my office a minute. I'd like a word with you."

"Why not?" Chap said.

He followed Beaumont away through the crowd, and he knew that the crowd was putting high hope in Beaumont. They passed through a doorway under a stairs that was open only to the elect. Beaumont shut the door with a careless shove and said, "Sit down, Chapman."

"Thanks, but I exercised my seat all down through the canyon. What's in your craw, Beaumont?"

"You know. We've got to have water or we're finished."

"First I knew you were mining," Chap drawled.

"Look," Beaumont said and was suddenly angry, "I know that winter's coming again as well as you do. Some of the boys have done well enough that they can weather a shutdown. For every one who can do that there's another who can't. The odds are even worse in the camp here. Not one establishment in three could ride through the long shutdown."

"Rubbish," Chap said, "that I'd like to see removed, Beaumont. This was clean range before you come here with your crowd."

"We've looked into the legal aspects," Beaumont said irritably. "We can't get relief quick enough that way. But there are plenty of men in the gulch who say the hell with legal aspects. You're defying the lightning, and it's going to strike."

"That sounds like fatherly advice," Chap said, "but I think it's more of a threat from you personally. You must have quite a take from the Nugget and the other things you've got a hand in. No mining, no gold dust, no take. Am I getting the picture, Beaumont?"

"You've got the picture. I staked my all on this camp, and I'm not used to being oppôsed. You've got forty eight hours to think it over."

"I don't need that many seconds. The answer is still no."

"You're using a two edged sword, man. Don't be surprised when you find it's cut your own throat."

CHAP HAD another drink at the bar before he left. Afterward he went to a barbershop and had himself shaved and trimmed. He ate his supper in a restaurant and kept waiting for the next precipitous miner to start trouble. But nobody else tried, and this informed Chap that Beaumont had started his groundwork already. They waited now for something concerted. Until it came, no one else was going to risk aborting it through independent action.

Night had come on fully, and flickering yellow street lamps marched dismally down the long thoroughfare. Chap was on the point of going to his horse for the ride home when, as he passed a log hotel, he caught a quick breath. She was coming through the wide, open doorway of the hotel, was looking at him and faintly smiling. He touched his hat and halted.

This woman was the one bit of beauty in all the camp's raw ugliness, a beauty of body and of singing voice which served her well in Beaumont's Nugget. Her eyes helped. They and the voice and the lithe little body motions promised a man unbelievable wealth. But already Chap knew her to be as shrewdly impersonal as Monty Beaumont. As yet she had not kept a one of those silently broadcast promises.

She came on to him, saying in a throaty voice, "Hello, Chap Chapman." The words, the look she gave him—they were as intimately personal as a thing could be. That was her weapon because it gave an identical feeling of personal preference to every one of five thousand men.

He said, "Not working tonight?"

"Presently. Coming over to hear me?"

"Might start a riot. I was in the Nugget for a drink, and the atmosphere wasn't what I'd call cordial."

She laughed softly, a dark girl whose sleek-fitting clothes bespoke the most exclusive and expensive shops in San Francisco, whence she came, whose fine features and body lines gave the same sharp contrast to the coarse mediocrity of the miners who panted for her.

In the next moment there was a stir of excitement down the street. Men congregated momentarily, then some made off on the run. Most of them moved in the other direction.

"Something's happened," Lorinda breathed. "I hope it doesn't pertain to you, Chap Chapman. Although I admire your courage, you were a fool for coming here. Yet—I thought maybe you would."

"You got a plea to make, too? That your job will be gone if I don't put water in the Tunnel?"

With a slight shrug she said, "My job will be gone. But I don't propose to argue with you. I never try to play a man's part."

"Doing quite well enough as a woman."

She let him have the merest edge of a frown. Then somebody running along the

sidewalk toward them captured their interest again. The man gave a look at the hotel as he neared. His lowering glance took in Lorinda and he came on toward her.

He flung Chap a look, then said, "I figured you ought to know, Miss Lorinda. Johnny Twogood's just busted out of jail."

"Oh, no!" Lorinda gasped, and Chap had never seen a woman look so terror-stricken.

"But don't you worry, ma'am," the man said. "They'll catch him. Anyhow, that was just a wild threat. Johnny knows it would cost his life if he tried to carry it out."

"Thanks, Jeff," Lorinda said, and that was her dismissal. The man touched his hat, turned and hurried back, eager to get in on the chase.

After a long moment, Lorinda said, "Would you like to come up to my hotel room? There's something I must talk to you about."

"As long as it isn't water," he said. "That's an invitation no man in this camp would turn down."

"You're one of the very few ever got it," she retorted. "Come on."

He followed her into the hotel, the best in Bonanza City, and they ascended the wide staircase. Her room was at the top, and when they had entered she closed the door and looked at him carefully. A lamp had been left burning.

Lorinda Luce snapped her fingers and said, "Just like that I'm in mortal danger. And you can help me, Chap. When they locked up Johnny Twogood, he threatened to break out and kill me. I think he meant it, and I'm not as confident as Jeff Winters of their ability to keep him from doing it."

"What happened?" Chap asked.

She moved her hands as if pleading for understanding and said, "Johnny had a poor claim, and he's hardly a grown man. He made himself a pest to me. He got the naive idea that if he had enough money I'd go away with him."

"So?"

"Well, he held up an express runner and took some twenty thousand in gold dust. But I wouldn't go away with him. When he was caught, he thought I'd tipped off the law and made that threat."

"Did you do the tipping off?"

"Of course," she said promptly. "Wasn't it my place?"

"Maybe," Chap said. "But it wasn't your duty to get the kid crazy about you."

"Why, I never did a thing to encourage him. He isn't even dry behind the ears. I could get me a rich and law abiding man if I wanted one. I never led on Johnny or any other man."

Roughly, he said, "You never do anything else. I'm not sure you wouldn't have worked that gold dust out of Johnny anyhow if he hadn't been blundersome enough to get caught. Everything about you promises a man. I'd call you a more honest woman, if, once in a while, you made good."

He saw a stain slowly climb into her cheeks, and a glimmer of something more threatening than promising entered her eyes. Then with a smile she said, "I'll let that one pass. It happens that there is something I need of you, Chap Chapman, and I think you'll give it to me."

"What's that?"

"You've got to hide me until they catch Johnny."

"Me," he gasped. "Why?"

"You're one of the few men around here who know the country better than Johnny and the miners. You can hide me safely, Chap. I want you to take me to The Hole."

"To hell with you," he snapped, then his breath caught and held. She did nothing more than stand there looking up at him, directly into the depths of his eyes. Her lips slowly parted to form a smile. Her eyes visibly lighted with interest.

She said, "Some day there'll be a man who'll compel me to make good my promises. Maybe he'll be you. Who knows?

Get a horse and wait for me below camp. I'll join you as soon as I can slip away without being noticed."

"No smoke," he answered and walked out.

2 Dangerous Guest

The excitement of the jailbreak and the jeopardy in which it had placed the camp's darling combined into an added immunity for Chap as he tramped along the street. He got his horse, rose to leather and rode to the livery barn. A posse was forming, and he knew that soon the stable would be cleaned out of rideable horses.

He spoke to the hostler in a clipped tone. "Want a good cayuse for a friend of mine. Quick."

"You going after Twogood?" the man asked. "It's the best way to catch him quick. You cowpokes know every hideout in these parts. I'll give you the best I got."

The man had accepted the look Chap had tried to give it and did not find it untoward when he led both horses through the barn, presently, and out a rear door. Remounting his own animal there, Chap rode along the gulch that ran behind the buildings on that side of the main street, making his way cautiously to the southern edge of camp.

A sage and scrub juniper on this side ran on into the starlit desert. Pressed into the concealment of the scented trees, he dismounted and waited. He had not long to keep there for presently he discerned a small shape hurrying through the sage toward him, sometimes lost and again an exciting image.

Lorinda Luce came up in her confident way, saying, "Something changed your mind?"

"Yes. You said some man might make you keep your promises. I say some man will make you want to keep them."

After the briefest pause, she said, "I accept the challenge, Chap Chapman."

She wore a divided skirt now and rose easily to saddle. He swung his horse on. The lights of the camp, the noise fell rearward. The mild night breeze of the desert bore a heady fragrance of wild plants and earth still warm from the long hot day. Although they were at that point riding directly away from The Hole, Lorinda seemed to trust her escort fully.

He justified that when, after ten minutes, he bent to the right and headed toward the dark, huddled outlines of the distant hills. Not long afterward they were swallowed by the first canyons. But he was still not entirely easy. He didn't know Johnny Twogood from Adam's off ox. But he did know what could come from a youngster carried beyond his depth by a woman's pull. He agreed with Lorinda that Johnny's threat had not been idle, that his chances of carrying it out were better than the man Jeff had let on.

Presently he said, "I'm going to give you a rough ride. Over the backbone of the hills and into the back side of The Hole. My side of Tunnel Creek."

"I hear that you own half of The Hole," she answered.

Nodding, he said, "It belongs to me and Bulldog Jones. Ever been up that far?" And, when she shook her head, "It's flat country high in the mountains. The crick cuts it in half and the crick's dug deep like in most plateau country. Bulldog's got the east half, me the west. We got the dam you've heard so much about, but no lake to draw on believe me. The crick's cut so deep it gives us enough storage by just keeping the banks full. The miners could draw it down to zero in a week and be as bad off as before."

"They mean to take that water away from you," Lorinda said.

"Meaning and doing are two different matters."

An hour's riding, and they were up much

closer to the blazing stars. When that time had doubled, they swung eastward and began to descend. At last they were upon the mountain flat, which seemed identical with the one where they had started their night's ride. But the difference was in some two thousand feet of elevation.

They began to pass cattle that now was bedded down about them, catching the smell of the herd which always was tonic to Chap. Then, as they came close to the creek and its cottonwood fringe, a distant huddle of buildings and corrals appeared out of the darkness.

He said, "I've got no riders, but I don't guess you can stay at the house very long. I can't be there much during the day."

"Where will you put me?" she asked.

He made a motion with his left hand, saying, "You can sleep in the house until daylight. There's a lava cave not far from there. I thought of it after you asked me to hide you. Outlaws used to use it before there were buildings here. Lived in it myself when I was setting up. Only a few old-timers know about it. Even they couldn't find you in there, if you didn't want."

He guessed that she did not like the prospect but she said nothing. They rode on and presently arrived at his headquarters, buildings of rock and timber that were better and larger than his immediate needs cut to fit his hopes and dreams.

Before the porch he halted and said, "Light down. I'll put up the horses and be back. You hungry?"

"A little."

"Then light a fire in the stove and start coffee. You'll find cold beans and biscuits."

As he unsaddled the two horses, he discovered that he was trembling. The situation was bad enough, he told himself, without getting carried away by the magnetism of this woman. There was the water fight, and the threat posed by Johnny Two-good was not to be dismissed lightly. He was scowling when, presently, he walked back to the house.

Lorinda had lighted the lamp and started a fire and in these surroundings seemed not at all like the woman he remembered from across the smoky footlights at the Nugget and her daring every man there to come and take her. It was the simplicity of her clothes now, he supposed, that made the difference, coupled with the faint lines of fatigue on her face. She seemed neither clumsy nor annoyed with the work she did now, the simple kitchen chores of a woman born and raised to toil.

HE LET her fix their meal. Some five thousand men would have envied him that moment. Afterward, he said, "I got a spare bedroom. Bed's made up. Anybody coming here from the lower flat usually stays overnight. Help yourself."

She gave him a quick look, then went through the doorway to which he pointed. He watched that place a while, then went to his own room.

He awakened remembering and doubtful of his good sense. But the alarm in his brain had gone off punctually. A look at the stars, when he had crossed to the window, told him that it lacked an hour to dawn. He dressed and, going to the kitchen, made up a cooking outfit for Lorinda. He added food and three blankets. Then he stepped into her bedroom.

She still slept soundly and he saw that she had not undressed. Throwing back the covers, he placed a hand on her warm shoulder and felt his whole arm tingle with life.

Shaking her gently, he said, "Rise and shine."

She came awake with a start, and in that moment he discerned that there was a good deal of bluff in this girl. She could be afraid and was as she got her bearings. He walked out, and when she came out to join him she was her former, sure self.

He said, "No time for breakfast here, but I put cold grub in your pack. You'll

have time aplenty to cook after it's gone."

"When will I see you?" she asked.

"When and if it suits me."

They walked the short distance through the sagebrush, going westward from the the house. There was nothing to disclose the presence of the subterranean cave except a scab of rock rising up in the sage and all but hidden. The aperture could not be discerned at all until close at hand. He heard her draw in a breath of dismay and knew that to her it seemed like a prospective descent into the infernal depths of the earth.

She gasped, "Won't there be snakes in there—wild animals?"

"It's possible," he said. "I put a pistol in your pack. The rest is up to you." He went first through the narrow passageway into the blackest kind of mystery. He had not yet told her that there was a second entrance to the place that kept it ventilated and would also give her the chance to slip out and away if come upon from either direction. Bandits had driven out the wild animals, long since, and during his own experience there rattlers had likewise disdained the place. She could discover those reassuring facts for herself.

First he lighted a lantern and disclosed a large, high-ceilinged room with a bare dirt floor. A black circle in the center showed where countless campfires had burned. She gasped when she saw the built-in bunks along the wall.

"Women have lived here before," he told her. "The outlaws' kind."

"You include me in or out of that classification, my friend?"

"I've considered you a woman since the first time I saw you across footlights. Nothing's happened since to change my mind. You'll be warm enough during the day without a fire, and do your cooking at night. I'll fetch you wood and fresh water every night, too." Chap pointed upward. "The smoke goes out through a crack up there. Daytime it might draw notice. Now, I'll leave you to your meditations."

She was watching him sharply and she said, "You're holding me responsible for Johnny Twogood."

"Why should I? You never done anything to him. Said so, yourself."

He left, and it was time to put her out of his mind. Bourne and Miller were coming up that day with a cut of dried out steers from the lower flat. He had to board them until after the fall rains. That was because of the miners infesting the canyon. He had to remember that and forget the warm promise now on his ranch, with only himself and her knowing it.

Returning to headquarters, he cooked breakfast for himself. Afterward he saddled up and rode out to do his routine work. Morning broke over the hills in a blaze of hot light. As he settled to routine, he began to ease up. He ran less than a thousand head of shorthorns, as yet, but he had room for five times that many. That was why he could take boarders. He and Bulldog Jones traded work, sparing him the need of a crew except at roundup.

When he had completed his rounds, he crossed the creek by way of a natural bridge and headed for Jones' headquarters. Skyhook was larger than his own outfit, Bulldog being an older man and farther along in the business. He had a range tally of around three thousand and used two regular punchers. It made hard work, but they were all tough men or they wouldn't have been there in the mountains at all.

SKYHOOK'S HEADQUARTERS sat securely against the first rises of the eastern hills. The punchers were out on the morning's work, but Bulldog was home and he, too, had company. They sat on the porch and waited for Chap to come up to them. The rancher was an iron gray man with hardrock eyes.

Bulldog said, "Howdy, Chap. Shake hands with my sister's husband. Branch Trecher."

A skinny, ascetic looking man rose from a barrel chair and held forth a thin hand. There was a disinterested kind of strength in the grip, not that of a virile and friendly man, and Bulldog's eyes didn't come within eighty degrees of being as cold as this fellow's.

"Howdy, Chapman," Trecher said and seated himself again.

Taking perch on the bannister, Chap said, "I went down to Bonanza City last night and got a warning. They're not waiting for water anymore, Bulldog. They've threatened to take it. We'll have to put a guard on the dam, and you'll have to handle it. I'll have my hands full with the boarders the boys are bringing up today."

"I'll take care of the dam," Bulldog said with a scowl. "Anybody fooling around there will get ventilated. I'm at the end of my patience with them people."

Chap let his attention drift back to Trecher. He had not known that Bulldog was possessed of relatives, and this was the first time to his knowledge that he had entertained company from outside. Chap was curious about Branch Trecher. There was something creepy in the unblinking, preoccupied stare of the man's eyes.

He said, "Getting you some mountain air, Trecher?"

"A little vacation," Bulldog interposed.

Trecher nodded, but the expression in his eyes said that he cared neither for mountain air, scenery nor a vacation.

"Comes from Boise," Bulldog added when the pause grew awkward. "It gets mighty hot there, this time of year."

"Making bag for the same here," Chap said, rising.

"Nothing like up our way," Trecher said.

"Don't you worry about the dam," Bulldog called, as Chap swung back into saddle. "You got your hands full with the boarders. Rest easy about the other."

"I won't rest easy," Chap assured him. "Let me know if you need me."

He returned home hungry for his noon meal. He had all but forgotten Lorinda Luce until he passed the telling rock slab at a distance which caused him to grin in cool mirth. That hole in the ground was a prison built by her mind and would remain so as long as Johnny Twogood ran loose with his whereabouts unknown. Chap had a feeling he could count on her staying right where she was until he told her it was safe to leave.

There was no horse in his ranchyard, which caused him to give a start when, riding up to the house, he saw a figure waiting on his porch. His look of surprise changed slowly to a frown, for it was Connie Racine, alone and waiting for him in patent anxiety.

Dismounting at the porch, he dropped the reins of his horse and ascended to her. He said, "You're a long way from home and you seem to have walked it. So it must have been important. What brought you up here?"

Her corn-blue eyes held a snapping truculence. "I learned something after I saw you yesterday. That Branch Trecher is related to Bulldog Jones. He's visiting Jones now. We saw him go up the canyon yesterday. One of the boys followed to see if he was coming here. He went to Jones' place—not that that makes a whit of difference."

The temper, the driving urgency in her made her an appealing figure. He grinned, saying, "Whoa, there. If we're to hold an intelligent conversation, you've got to give me more of the subject."

"You don't know Branch Trecher?" she asked.

"Never met him till an hour ago, over at Bulldog's. Then I got about six words outta him in all. What's so bad about them being related and him here on a visit?"

She shrugged. "We'll pretend you don't know, just to get the conversation started

right. Branch Trecher is one of those low forms of life you find in mining country. A professional grubstaker and usurer. A blood-sucker, a thief, an underhanded dog."

"Struck me as a mite odd," Chap admitted.

"Go ahead—enjoy it. You know as well as I do that he means to freeze us out."

"I fell off," Chap said. "You better pretend again I don't know what you're talking about."

"Very well. I don't suppose you ever learned that those of us on the uppermost part of the creek came from Idaho. Desperate people. The only kind that go to leeches like Trecher for a grubstake. The only kind that would sign up with him."

"What do you mean—sign up?"

Connie threw up her hands in an exasperated gesture. "Before you get a grubstake from Trecher you sign an agreement. It not only gives him the usual percentage of any pay dirt located and claimed. There's a stipulation that he gets possession of the claim if you have to give it up. He made his money that way in the Idaho mines. He's backed a lot of the Idaho men who've come down here."

"Including you?"

"Including me."

"I'll be jiggered," Chap breathed. "Reckon I see what's gravelled you now. You figure we're holding back water to pull off a freezeout. That's not so stupid an assumption, either. Trecher's kin to Bulldog, and Bulldog's a partner of mine in the dam."

"That's exactly what I think!" she blazed. "It will do you no good to deny it."

"What's this about desperate men, Connie? They that way even before they come here?"

"I know your attitude," she said harshly. "That miners are all a bunch of moonstruck people who'd ought to be working at something sensible. Can't you realize that there are people who need considerable money and need it quick? They gamble on a place like this to get it. Like Charlie Sanders—old and broke and with a wife. Like Ralph Turnbo—whose boys need an operation he'll never pay for off his homestead. They're the kind of men who have to take a grubstake from Branch Trecher."

"And you?" he insisted. For once he was almost gentle.

"I only want a chance to do something besides wait on tables the rest of my life."

Chap said, "I'm hungry, and you are after that hike. Come in and we'll cook while I try to convince you you exploded a bombshell."

"I want no favors from you."

"But you're hungry?"

"Yes."

"Come on."

She followed him into the house, reluctant and puzzled by his change in manner. But his outward gentleness did not match the sudden agitation he felt. Men in the West could know each other and work together for years without learning much of inner matters. He knew little of Bulldog Jones except the cowman side where the man had no betters. Yet he was tightfisted, he liked the coin of the realm and was not too scrupulous about picking up a stray calf. It was entirely possible that he knew Trecher was backing Idaho miners coming to this new bonanza. He could have advised the man to do so, knowing they were bound to drought out in summer and give up their claims.

3 House Afire

Starting to cook, Chap said, "Connie, you put me in a spot. Wish you'd believe that I know nothing about Bulldog's understanding with Trecher—if any. No matter how it stands, we can't let go of water for you. If Bulldog's really in with Trecher, he wouldn't stand for a single drop pass-

ing our gates. That's to say nothing about drought steers I've got to carry through."

"Your precious steers!" she hooted angrily.

He whirled on her, his eyes snapping. "You ever see a drought herd? It's not pleasant. It takes a dried out steer a while to die. And the dying just isn't nice."

His temper leaped to her and seemed to explode all through her. "I know about that. I grew up on a cattle ranch before I lost my folks. I've seen drought. Now let me ask you one. Have you ever taken a good look at a busted miner? It's not a pleasant sight, either!"

He could only stare at her and make a complete revision of his estimate. It wasn't only her spunk; he'd known she had that. But, mad as a hen doused with scrub water, she was pretty as a bobcat kitten. He didn't care if he was mixing up his metaphors—she got a man clean through.

He held up a hand, saying, "Wait a minute. They have dry diggings, sometimes. Packing the pay dirt to water to wash it. You could do that. I give you my permission. I'll even furnish a horse to pack your dirt up here. What more do you want—you want me to wash the stuff, too?" He wanted to help.

A shining expression leaped onto her face, a spontaneous relief and gratitude. Then it left more slowly than it had come. She shook her head regretfully. "I can't take a special favor, Chap. I came here with the men, asking no consideration because of my sex. I've run my claim alone. I'll make it or go broke with the others."

He threw up his hands. "We can't do it for all of them. There'd be miners all over the place."

"Thanks, then," she said. "I'm not hungry. I'll be going."

"Wait."

"No—no, Chap." He realized that she was close to tears, that she dared not show him.

He said, "Well, you could do me a favor. I got a livery horse here. Ride it as far as your place. Take it on into camp when you get a chance. Tell the man I'll square up when I'm in again."

She looked at him briefly and there were a thousand mysteries in her eyes. She said, "All right."

He saddled the horse from Bonanza City and brought it to the house. The way she rose to leather, forking it without self consciousness, told him that she had not lied about her ranching past. She nodded at him, swung the horse and was away. Girl and rushing animal were fused together as the sagebrush swallowed them.

The boarder cut came in from the lower flat that afternoon, over three hundred head that already showed the effect of short water. Bourne and Miller brought them up through the hills, having to skirt the congested canyon and were irritable about that interference with what was more important operations. The steers were allowed to drink, then were crossed over the creek by way of the natural bridge. Afterward they were allowed to drift on into the hills to hunt up their own grass. The punchers from below hit for home at once. Both had a lot of handpumping to do for the stock still on home range.

Chap cooked supper, and an hour after nightfall blew out his lamp. But he was far from ready for bed. Filling a canteen with fresh water and looping it over a shoulder, he loaded his arms with firewood and headed for the cave.

Coming close, he called out quietly, reassuringly, and heard Lorinda's plaintive answer. The bend in the entrance cut off the lantern light until he had made the turn. Then he saw her, standing forlornly and watching him.

"How did you make out?" he asked.

"I've never spent so horrible a day in all my life!" she cried. "There must be a better place than this! Why can't I stay at the house?"

"Never know who's coming," he told

her. "You're not safe if one man besides me learns you're here. You know that. The word would travel. Sooner or later it would reach a man waiting for a chance at you."

"All right," she said wearily. "I'll stay here."

Softly, he said, "Feeling a little like Johnny felt in jail?"

"Go ahead!" she blazed, whirling on him. "Keep trying to get even—when you don't even know the man."

"But I know men—and what you do to them."

"Chap, please. Why can't I come to your house just at nights and hide here daytimes?"

Tauntingly, he said, "Already you're begging to come to a man."

"You trying to get a trade out of it? So I let myself in for something."

"Lady, how does it feel?" He walked out.

Morning came without there being any evidence of trouble at the dam during the night. Saddling up, Chap rode out for his morning rounds, now having to press deeper into the hills where there was danger of the new, unsettled steers drifting too far to find their way back to water. The riding took him all morning, and he shagged back a few breachy steers.

When he reached the bridge that could take him across to Skyhook, he halted, rolling and smoking a cigarette while he pondered Branch Trecher. But there was little use in talking with him or Bulldog about the matter Connie had brought up. They would simply deny any underhanded intentions. They needed no help. All they had to do was to keep water out of the canyon, and Bulldog had a thoroughly legitimate excuse for that.

Chap went home to eat and try to keep his mind off the woman he had trapped in the lava cave. He was finishing the meal when he heard the drum of hoofs in the southern distance. Rising from table, he stepped hastily to the doorway to stare out across the sun-baked sageland. He saw that it was Tom Carey, who carried the mail up the canyon twice a week. Carey had only a couple of newspapers for Chap. But in his pause before crossing to Skyhook he dropped a piece of startling information.

"Well, they caught young Twogood, last night. He's back in jail."

Chap flung a quick, involuntary glance in the direction of the cave, caught himself and shrugged. "Too bad. But if the kid stuck up an expressman, he's got jail time coming. If he's learned not to fool with women, that will be a good lesson, too."

"Maybe," Carey said. "Though it's one I never learned, myself." He rode on.

FOR A WHILE, thereafter, Chap stood rubbing his jaw with the rough palm of his hand. His power to hold Lorinda there in the cave had been swept from him without warning. Yet he began to grin in a cold, half-bitter way. His power would be gone only if she learned that Johnny was back behind bars. But it would be safe enough to let her emerge from the cave now, a deliverance he suspected she would receive with gratitude. This was the time to go see her.

She almost ran out of the cave in her eagerness when she heard him call to her. But he dropped none of the caution he had exercised previously. Drawing her hastily back inside, he said, "I thought you might have heard a horse. It was only the mailman."

She didn't even seem to hear him, crying, "I can't stay here another night! Last night I thought I'd go crazy! You've got to let me come to the house!"

"Begging again," he said.

"I don't care."

"Maybe I've got a price on that."

"I don't care!" she cried.

"Well—when it's good and dark."

"No, Chap—now. I'll hide in the attic, in the closet. Anywhere."

"Let me take a look outside," he said. He went out and remained away for some minutes. When he returned to her, he said. "Coast seems clear. We'll hurry."

If anything, he had to hold her back to keep her from bolting and running as they crossed the open toward the house. The minute she was indoors, she dropped onto a chair and began to sob. He realized that he had crowded her close to hysteria. For a minute pity touched him. But it was washed away by the thought of Johnny Twogood back in jail. Because of her, no matter what she said, because of her unspoken promises and the kid's wild hungers.

Chap said, "I aim to be around this afternoon. You'd better catch some sleep before you fall over dead. But remember, if you hear anybody coming up on us you cut into the closet and be quiet. Stay there till I tell you it's safe to come out."

"I think I'd welcome Johnny Twogood just to get it over. You don't know how I loathe you."

"That's considerably untrue."

"You're very confident."

"Of what? To be confident, a man's got to hope for something. I don't."

Lorinda slept as if she were drugged, lying crosswise on the bed. Afterward she ate the meal he had prepared hungrily. The food and rest did much to restore her old spirit. Some of the deviltry came back in her eyes so that he marveled at this woman whose main business seemed to be the torment of men. Maybe she did not realize the extent to which she exercised it. He could never be sure that she did. Yet it was there, the intoxicating magnetism of a woman whose meat was men.

Monty Beaumont had spoken of a two edged sword in connection with the water dispute. This was another, Chap thought, one on which he could cut himself badly. She knew that. But she still believed herself to be wholly dependent upon him for her safety. Yet she was restored now, out of her prison and ready to play her old game.

Then, out of the night, there came a series of muted but clearly recognizable gunshots. Stiffening, Chap swung his attention southward then hissed, "Blow out the lamp. Hide if anybody comes close to the house."

"Oh God!" Lorinda moaned. "Is it Johnny Twogood?"

"That's at the dam. It looks like the miners have come."

He reached the corral in lunging strides and took time only to snake out a horse and go up bareback. Presently he was thundering along the rough road that led to the canyon and dam. The shooting continued, growing ever louder as he rode. Starshine lighted the desert flat about him and brought into prominence the lifts of the hills.

Just short of the dam he dismounted and ran forward, his gun in hand. The dam had been blown down from the canyon walls at low water. An aperture had been opened by scrapers for the installation of the gates that controlled the overflow. The town road ran on the dam level then dropped sharply into the canyon beyond. The assault was directly below there, he discerned, coming out of the boulders and brush.

Chap called out to identify himself as he came onto the fill and heard Bulldog's blunt response. Then he flung down on the dry edge of the dam, which rose some eighty feet above the dry creek bed. He put an intense study on the lower foreground. Gunflashes showed him that no more than eight or ten miners had made this try. Some were on the bank above the trail, others across.

When he had studied the place in bitter temper, Chap began his own fire. The shots were sharp, rocking noises along the canyon walls. The lead coming from below either impacted in the dirt or whined away

above the heads of the defenders. The angle the miners had picked was too sharp for much effect. Whoever led them was a chucklehead, Chap reflected, and this just didn't seem like what Monty Beaumont had threatened to deliver. Beaumont was no fool.

The addition of his own gun to the defense seemed to have an effect on the attackers. The brisk firing continued for a few minutes, then its outpour began to dwindle. Chap emptied his gun, reloaded and emptied it again. Then, from the slacked fire below, he felt that they were pulling out. They had never stood a chance of success coming in the way they had. This still puzzled Chap.

When the shooting had quit, he moved over to where Bulldog Jones lay on the earth. He said, "If they've got no better leaders than that, we have nothing to worry about."

"Some smart alecs acting on their own, likely," Bulldog said. "But it shows there's men down there who'll try it. If they learned a lesson this time, the next time they'll do it better. We don't dare get careless, Chap."

Bulldog's two punchers moved in, then.

With a dry tone in his voice, Chap said, "Didn't Trecher offer to help guard this thing?"

"Why should he?" Bulldog retorted. "He's up here for a rest."

"Which same I'm wondering about," Chap replied. "I hear he's got a considerable business interest in Bonanza Canyon."

For a moment Bulldog stared at him through the starlight. "Now, where did you hear that, Chap?"

"Talked to a miner from Idaho. One who come here grubstaked by Branch Trecher. There's a lot of others. They had to sign an agreement with Trecher that's got a clause in it giving him possession of the claims if they have to be thrown up."

"So what?" Bulldog asked harshly.

"So I'm wondering how come he heard about Bonanza Canyon, which happens to lay right next door to his wife's brother. Could it be you wrote the man as to that, Bulldog?"

Always a blunt, aggressive man, Bulldog did not try to evade. He said, "All right. So I did, and why not?"

"You got a stake in them grubstakes, Bulldog?"

"What if I have? And why're you getting so sentimental about a passle of shirttail miners? Except for Branch's help, they wouldn't be here. Is it his fault they're going broke? Is it mine, when you're just as anxious to protect our water as I am? Answer them questions, Chap, before you come snorting like a mad bull at me."

Chap shrugged, saying, "Well, we better find out if we did any damage. I hope not, Bulldog. There's scum down there, but it's collected mostly in the camp. Them men with dry sluices see what we see in a dried out steer."

"You going soft on us boys, Chap?"

"Depends on what you mean by soft, Bulldog."

INVESTIGATION OF the lower site disclosed no casualties. Chap's relief was greater than he wanted Bulldog Jones and the man's punchers to see. Maybe Connie Racine had planted this unexpected reaction in him, but he wasn't looking on the miners as fools any more. He kept seeing the old man who wanted something to keep him in his old age, the one with the boy who needed an operation—and the girl who didn't want to wait tables all her life. Chap guessed he could multiply that down the length of Bonanza Canyon and not be far wrong about the men who had labored there throughout the long, hard winter.

He disliked the situation less and less as he pondered it. It set wrong that in fighting for his own interests he had to advance those of a man cut out like Branch Trecher.

Taking a final, uneasy look about the

site, Bulldog let out a sudden yell of excitement. "By God, boys! They brought up a sack of dynamite! Scared so bad they went off and left it. Just how crazy can them sons get? Blowing out this dirt would be a sure way to ruination."

He came up onto the fill presently, gingerly carrying a gunnysack. Looking at Chap, he added, "What'll we do with the stuff? Ought to take it out in the desert and explode it before some other fools get hold of it."

"I'll stash it in my cave," Chap said, "and we can get rid of it later." He was scowling. Discovery of the explosives had reminded him of the deadliness of the situation. The showdown was drawing close and it involved reckless and ignorant men on the other side. They dared not relax vigilance at the dam for a minute. He wished that they had more help.

When he had placed the dynamite in the cave temporarily, he made his way to the darkened house. Lorinda must have identified him, for she had not hidden herself but was waiting in the darkness of the kitchen.

There was a detectable urgency in her voice when she said, "Are you all right?"

"Okay," he reported, "which I expect you regret to hear."

"If you care to know, I was afraid for you. You're different, Chap, to any man I've ever known. There's a kind of primitive wildness in you that—well, I like. You're nobody's fool, least of all a woman's."

"From what I've gathered fooling men is your stock in trade."

"Let's straighten out a thing or two, Chap," Lorinda said softly. "You have nothing but contempt for me, and you're not fair. I've told you I can't help the way men respond to me. I haven't denied that I let them do things for me and give me presents. Ever since I was grown it's been a steady business of dodging men, holding them off, putting up with their sweaty passions. As long as that is true and inescapable, why shouldn't I be repaid for it?"

"I heard that line of reasoning already tonight," Chap told her. "If you can profit from what's going to be anyway, why not?"

"But you don't agree with it."

"Nor disagree. I just don't do business that way, myself."

After a moment, she said, "I guess that's why I've found the first man I ever liked. I'm sorry I said I hated you. I was just upset. Have I squared myself a little?"

He was aware of the pull of her across the darkness, aware of their aloneness in this house. As stimulating to him was the fact that she was revising her opinion of him, however reluctantly it had come. Maybe he had her dead wrong, too. Nobody ever knew what was in another person. A man saw a few things that made him condemn the whole individual.

Then she said, "I'm going to bed now. Goodnight." And he was alone, staring hard at the doorway that swallowed her. Then he turned into his own room.

He rose at dawn, saddled a horse, and at once rode south. Tom Carey was on guard at the dam, and he looked surprised when Chap stopped for a moment. "You going down into that hornet's nest again, Chap?" he asked.

"There's some people I want to tell what they can expect if they blow this plug out of the canyon.

"Well, it's your hide," Carey reflected. "But I'm damned if I'd do it, myself."

Chap grinned and rode on. In the canyon below the dam were grim reminders of the night's violence, empty shells and the scuffed bootprints of skulking men. He halted to look around again in the better light but could see no sign of blood-shed. He was glad of that and determined to do all he could to prevent a repetition of such folly.

The poverty-stricken upper end of Bonanza Canyon was just beginning to stir when he rode in. Going at once to Connie's tent, he swung down. The flaps were down,

but in a moment she looked out through the slit, gasping, "Chap!"

"Surprised to see I still hold water?"

"You surely don't blame us for what happened last night."

"I think," he retorted coolly, "that it could have come only from desperate men, such as you described to me lately. And men just as foolish. I don't think you helped, Connie. But you can help me if you've got influence enough to make your sidekicks see light. If they're set on taking water, tell them to stick to opening the gate by hand. Use dynamite up there, and they'll start a flash flood that would wash this canyon clean as a whistle, taking the camp out with it. I'd call that good riddance except that too many men would drown."

"Chap," she said urgently, "come inside. I've got to talk to you."

HE WAS aware that on either side men were staring at him. The flap opened for him, and he stepped into Connie's tent.

In a voice scarcely above a whisper, she said, "I don't want to broadcast this. We know about the trouble up there last night, of course. But the men didn't come from here, Chap. They came through here, going and coming. They were from Bonanza City."

"Beaumont," Chap said. "Although I allowed that he was too smart for that kind of caper."

"I'd allow so, myself. So it must not have been Beaumont."

"Or it was only a fake pass," Chap said. "A foolish try at throwing a scare into us."

"Or an effort to draw your attention away from where he's really going to hit."

"Well, one thing's sure," Chap said. "It looks like you were right about Jones and Trecher. I sounded out Bulldog. He all but admitted what you suspected. I wish you'd see that it was all news to me."

"Oh, I do, Chap. And once I started to see light, I could appreciate your position. You've got to stick to it. I know that, now."

"Maybe I don't have to stick to it completely," he said. "I've got an idea that would beat Trecher and help the Idaho people. See if you can get them to throw a baffle across the creek bottom, just below your own workings. If they will, then I'll let down enough water for you to wash your gravel till the first rains."

The change in Connie's face was a wonderful sight. Relief surged up with high elation. She cried, "But can you? What about your partners?"

"The three from below," he said, "will go along with me. When it comes to Bulldog—well, there's a showdown coming between him and me, and the sooner the better."

"We'll do our part," she said and came forward. She looked up, then rose on her toes, cupped his cheeks and kissed his mouth. It wasn't any peck, it was all the feeling charging her. But there was no fire there, just appreciation. And his response was only tenderness . . .

Lorinda was awake when he reached home. She had not hidden herself upon hearing the approach of a horse, and that puzzled Chap. He also remembered the sweetness of Connie's kiss, and these two things tipped a decision in him he had not anticipated.

Abruptly, he said, "I was just down in Bonanza Canyon. I know something you'll be glad to hear. They've caught Johnny Twogood. He's back in the lockup."

Presently she said, without any great show of surprise or relief, "I was pretty sure of it, Chap, when you let me come out of the cave. I thought maybe you'd heard that from the man who arrived just before then. I think you said the mailman."

"All right," Chap snapped. "That's when I heard. Want me to take you down to camp this afternoon?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to go yet. Not till you've changed your opinion of me."

He gave her a long, close study. "That's important?"

"It's important. I didn't want it to be, but it got that way."

He seated himself on the edge of the bed and looked at her. Her face was entirely different to what it had been. It was not at all like the face he had seen across the limelights at the Nugget. It was not the face she kept turned to the camp. There was tenderness in her eyes, and about her mouth tugged the merest hint of longing.

He knew he could kiss those lips, knowing also that if he did he would never have enough of them. Words crowded his tongue, but he held them back, words that would be asking and promising things he could not foresee. She sensed the struggle in him and watched it break to the surface in its small ways. She waited.

Roughly, he said, "Well, you're out of danger. At least you can get up and cook breakfast."

She shook her head again and held up her arms. And then he came down to her.

Presently she whispered, "I don't want you to get killed. If I didn't before, certainly I don't now. You've got to end the trouble."

"Me? I didn't start it, and certainly I can't stop it. Not without just giving in."

"Would that be so bad? What the miners ask isn't unreasonable. It's not wrong. Giving in wouldn't be wrong, either. Couldn't you let enough water go down the creek for them to get along on until winter?"

"Not without taking a chance with cattle I'm responsible for."

"Wouldn't it be worth some risk to avoid the trouble?" she asked plaintively. "I want you to do it. Put water in the creek for me. Then I'll stay on with you here. I'll be everything you want."

"I know how you feel," he said. "But a man can't dodge danger just to keep a woman from worrying."

"Open the dam, darling," she whispered. "Or I'll go and you won't see me again."

HE WAS aware in that moment of how much he had surrendered to her. But maybe it was already too late to consider that. Memories had already tightened his mind and will. He knew what men had done in the hope of possessing her, and he of all men realized what the possession could be. He could not let her go, although she had named the price.

And where were the arguments that had seemed so cogent to him an hour back? He had only that morning offered to put enough water in the upper Tunnel to help the hard pressed Idahoans survive. What was the difference between that and going all the way? He could propose to the whole mining district that they dam the creek at the lower canyon mouth. It ought not to deplete his water supply dangerously. It would carry on the mining operations if they used the water wisely. He wondered why he had not thought of that before.

He said, "Well, now, maybe something could be worked out. Trecher and Jones are working a freezeout that I'd sure like to bust up."

Later, when he saddled a horse to ride over to Bulldog's, his mind was firmly made up. Without herself suggesting it, Lorinda had inspired in him a sensible solution to the whole problem. He had only to see Dupont, the mining camp alcalde, to get on with it. His wish to see Bulldog about it first rose out of his essential honest and forthright habits.

But as he rose to leather he began to doubt his wisdom. He had learned enough to know that Bulldog and Trecher would object violently to his proposal. They might even attempt to hold him by force to restrain him. It would be better, he guessed, to present them with an accomplished fact. That meant he would have to go down to Bonanza City at once and see Joe Dupont.

Realizing that would keep him away from The Hole throughout the day and maybe longer, he rode past the house.

Reaching the steps, he saw that Lorinda had appeared in the doorway. She looked down at him questioningly.

He said, "I just decided to go down to Bonanza City. I might not get back for a while. Don't worry."

A quick puzzlement leaped into her face and maybe something more. She said, "Bonanza City—but why, Chap?"

"I'm going to make Joe Dupont a proposition. If they'll baffle the creek below the last placers, I'll let down enough water for them to wash through the rest of the dry spell."

"You're ready to do it that quick?" she asked. Then, at his nod, "Wait for me, Chap. I want to go down with you."

"But why?"

She smiled at him. "Maybe I want to prove to this district that I'm capable of something besides self-interest. I was sort of instrumental in getting that decision out of you, wasn't I? You get me a horse. I'll be ready in a minute."

He saw no reason why she should not accompany him. But with her along, he had no wish to risk the hostility he knew would haunt him all down the canyon. So they rode out, taking the back trail by which he had brought her to The Hole.

They were at the edge of Bonanza City just past noon. Lorinda said, "Come to my hotel room while I change clothes and freshen up."

"No harm in that," he agreed, " and no pain."

Her reappearance in the camp caused a stir of interest. Having vanished without explanation and having likewise returned, men called to her. She answered pleasantly but no one pressed with questions. They racked their horses before the hotel, entered and ascended to the second floor.

It was the second time he had been in the room, and now his mind ran briefly over all that had transpired since the first time. As if divining this response in him, Lorinda smiled.

"Happy about it?" she asked. Then quickly she added, "Don't answer that. I'm not even going to ask if you love me. You don't—yet. Passion can spring from dislike, but love's got to come from liking. You don't like me—yet. But you will. I promise you. And so I'm certain that you will love me."

"And you?" he asked harshly.

"You're the only man I've ever wanted. I proved that, didn't I? Now, listen. We can help the miners, or we can help ourselves. I wanted to talk to you about it before you see Joe Dupont. That's why I came along."

He frowned in sudden bewilderment as he stared at her. "Why didn't you talk up there? Have you got a card up your sleeve?"

"Haven't I shown I'm on your side? But I'm going to make a clean breast of things so you'll know you can trust me from here on. When I persuaded you to hide me in The Hole, I did have a little plan in mind. I hoped to bring you around to where you were ready to put water back in Tunnel Creek."

"For the miners?" he asked and could not help the dryness of his voice.

"For me—for us, now. I wanted to be able to tell Monty Beaumont that you'd turn it on or shut it off according to my wishes. I expected to make him pay a handsome price to have it the way he wants. Now, wait. Beaumont, Trecher and Jones are working together."

"What?" Chap exploded. "Why, Beaumont himself threatened me unless I put water back in the Tunnel. It was him who sent the hoodlums up to the dam."

"All a blind," Lorinda said. "I saw through it immediately. Trecher's not the only one who's grubstaked miners all up and down the canyon. So has Beaumont. They knew what would happen here when dry weather came. They expect to be able to form a mining combine."

"Then Beaumont doesn't want water in

the tunnel anymore than Jones and Trecher."

She shook her head. "He'll pay a lot to keep it out of there—something he never figured he'd have to do."

"Now, you listen," Chap said, and his voice was as soft and cold as snow. "You're not blind to the fact that putting a price to Beaumont would mean selling out those poor devils in the canyon."

She came toward him, her eyes taking on the lustre he had so much cause to remember. In a low, teasing voice she said, "You'll never get over me, Chap. You'll never get along without me. Don't even try. I'll see Beaumont. I'll handle the whole thing. You won't have to do a thing you didn't intend to do this time yesterday." Her hands clutched his sides, her body came against him. He caught the fragrance of her hair, the warmth coming from her skin.

But he put the flat of a hand against her, pushed her back and smiled. He said, "Oh, no. You said part of it right. Passion can come from dislike. What you don't seem to know is that that kind of passion can turn into plain contempt."

"You're not going to the alcalde!" she cried. "Wait, Chap! I'll do it your way!"

Again his shaggy head moved slowly in its negation. "No, Lorinda. You won't ever do things my way. It's not in you."

4 Betrayal

As he walked down to the sidewalk, he felt a string had been jerked, pulling everything into a tight pattern. At last he knew precisely what he faced, a combine of ruthless men who would profit greatly unless he reversed his own stand and did what on his last visit here he had been resolved never to do. Now, instead of watching the miners go down in ruin, he had to save them. To save them, he had to buck dangerous men who controlled others who would help.

Chap rounded the corner to come face to face with Connie Racine. The girl gave him a straight, angry stare and said, "I saw you come into camp with Lorinda Luce and go up to her room. When did you take up with her?"

Shame washed through Chap, the worst he had known in his life. He knew in that raw moment that nothing Lorinda could ever give would equal Connie's tender kiss of gratitude.

Gruffly,he said, "It was short lived, and I assure you I want no more of her. Connie, I've got to find Joe Dupont—a man I don't know at all. Where would he be this time of day?"

"Up the canyon somewhere," she said, not wholly relenting. "Has something gone wrong?"

"Sort of," he admitted. "I found out that Monty Beaumont's in with Trecher and Jones. They're trying to get control of the canyon. So I'm going to make the same offer to the whole canyon I made to you. Got no choice, now. I must do it."

"I'll help you find the alcalde," she said quickly. "Go back and bring your horse while I get one from the livery."

Chap had swung about and rounded the corner when he came face to face with two men who halted, eying him narrowly.

One said, "Come along, Chapman. There's a man who wants to see you."

"Now, who would that be?" Chap retorted. "It happens I don't come like a sheep dog when somebody whistles."

"Beaumont wants to see you, Chapman. You better come."

Chap had not expected such a play on the open camp street and was caught flatfooted when one of the pair drew a gun with surprising speed. The two men moved up on either side of him to conceal the action from the public.

"In there," a man said, nodding to the nearby slot between two buildings.

In a matter of seconds it was all accomplished, and Chap found himself walking down between two crude walls toward the rear. A little later he was being ushered through the rear door of the Nugget saloon. His mouth was dry. There was a hard ache in his shoulders. Then he was prodded through another doorway and stood there looking at Monty Beaumont and Lorinda Luce. Lorinda had a vindictive smile on her lips.

"Lady, you move fast!" Chap breathed. "And as slippery as a mudplastered eel. You heard that yet, Beaumont? She tell you how she tried to do you in, first?"

"Shut the door and get out of here," Beaumont said to Chap's two escorts.

"Chapman, in this country, too much curiosity can get a man killed. The same goes for too much generosity when it comes to your water."

"Call it decency, if you're talking about sharing it."

"That's what I'm talking about, and call it anything you want." Beaumont was cool, confident. "But you can live a while longer. Until you make it apparent that you've got to die. Lorinda was telling me about that odd cave on your ranch. I think that's where you'll live from now until we've got control of the canyon. And something more, something Lorinda doesn't know yet, herself. She's going to live there with you."

"Oh, no, Monty!" Lorinda cried.

The gambler smiled at her coolly. "Your mistake, my dear, was in trying to square yourself by saying that you fell in love with the man. That didn't square anything. It only makes it worse."

"Don't punish me, Monty!" she pleaded.

Beaumont's laugh was not pleasant to hear. "You call it punishment being locked up with the man you say you love? Or should I say loved? There's an old saying, Chapman, about the fury of a woman scorned. You two will stay here until tonight. Then you're going back to the Hole . . ."

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Beaumont threw Chap and Lorinda into a damp cavern together.

"This could be cozy," Chap said. "Mighty cozy if nothing had happened to make this morning like it never was."

She gave her head a toss. "All right, you've seen me humbled. You've seen me ruined. But don't think that Monty Beaumont will be satisfied just to keep us here prisoners."

"An old lover of yours, perhaps?"

"You know better than that. But he's a deadly man, and your life isn't worth a nickel. You might wish I had some interest in saving it."

"You don't have?"

"That depends. Are you ready to play ball?"

"You're in the same fix I am," Chap told her. "I don't see your bargaining point."

Her smile was faintly aloof. "Then I'll tell you what it is. When I rushed down to see Monty about you, I was afraid he'd do

something to me. So I scribbled a note and left it at the hotel desk. To be delivered to Joe Dupont, the camp alcalde, if I wasn't back at the hotel in an hour. That time has long since passed. The note was short and sweet. It told Dupont about Beaumont, Trecher and Company—including you in that corporation. It told him the only way the miners will get water is to take it. I have a feeling they'll lose no time doing it."

"My God!" Chap breathed. "Did you realize what you were doing?"

"Certainly. They'll come and take that water before this night is done. They'll put an end to Beaumont and his partners, and the watchdog outside this cave will lose no time getting away from here."

"Where's your bargaining point?"

"What happens to you afterward will depend entirely on what I say. Haven't I been the one to help the miners by exposing you? They'll eat out of my hand. What do you say, Chap? I made the biggest play of my life with you, I laid the most on the line."

"And met your better."

"My better?" she breathed. "You think you are? Chap, you still want me. It's in your flesh and you haven't got it out. I can feel that now. I'll drive you mad with it before I'm through with you." A provocative smile formed on her lips. She stretched, bringing the lines of her body into prominence. She twisted and turned slowly, letting him have a full look at her. Facing him again, she bent forward, her arms stretched out behind, her lips pursed in invitation of his kiss.

HE ONLY stared at her, but the fire ran through him. He knew that she was right, dead right.

"I've got a couple of arguing points of my own," he said. He looked toward the cave entrance. One of the men who had brought them up was there on guard. There was little hope of catching him napping or of tricking him. Meanwhile, Chap could think only of Lorinda's note to the alcalde, which must have been broadcast long since, turning Bonanza Canyon into a seething emotional turmoil.

Men were bound to come boiling up the canyon to the dam. Bulldog and his companions could not hope to hold against them very long. They would tear open the gates, flooding the creek and compounding disaster. In a week the water would all have run off. Neither the miners or the cattle would have it.

But he had not forgotten about the dynamite he had cached in the cave only the night before. Rummaging, he located the gunnysack and opened it up.

"What are you going to do?" Lorinda cried when she recognized the contents.

"Start argument number one. I'm going to blow this place open."

"You'll kill us!"

"Maybe. And again I might get myself out in time to try and stop what you started."

She threw herself at him, panicked by his intentions. His only resort was to cuff her hard across the side of the head. She went down, whimpering. Lifting her, he carried her to a bunk and placed her down.

He said, "Behave, or I'll tie and leave you here when it goes off."

The threat subdued her, and it was only the work of minutes to insert a capped fuse into a stick of dynamite. He went at once to the entrance carrying the dynamite stick and called the sentry, who came forward suspiciously.

Chap said, "Take a look at this. You've got your choice between lighting your shuck before I blow up the whole cave or of blowing up with it. I got a whole sack of this inside."

"Where'd you get it?" the man breathed.

"You'd better be figuring out what you're going to do, man."

The man's face showed an even deeper shock than Lorinda's because the development was so unexpected. Then resolution

returned, and he said, "Go ahead and make your boom. I'm heading for the sage, but I'll be where I can drop you if you try to come out."

Chap's answer was to strike the match he held, hold it to the fuse and then throw the sputtering thing outward into the corridor. The man left in a bolting run.

Ducking back into the cave, Chap said, "Come on. He didn't know that there's a second way out of here. And you forgot that gun I gave you the night you came here." He found the gun and had barely pressed back into the wall niche Lorinda had found when an explosion occurred and the whole place was filled with choking dust. She clung to him but to his surprise the warmth of her flesh was suddenly no more than the feral warmth of a tigress.

He said, "He'll think we went up with it, and that will keep him off my neck a while. Come on."

It was no trick making their way through the sagebrush to the house, with the roar of the explosion still ringing in their ears. When they reached the corral, Chap said, "Listen. I don't think you're going to have those miners eating out of your hand when this is over. I think it's going to be the other way round, and I don't want to have to turn you over to one of their courts."

"You've got nothing on me!" she cried.

"Don't know of anything you have actually done," he admitted. "Only what you tried to do. I'm going into the canyon to try to stop what you started. You can take one of my horses. Be gone when I get back here, if I do."

"I—!" Protest and rancor were in that small cry. Her slim figure seemed to wilt. In a broken way, she said, "All right. I'll go. I can't beat you. I know that now."

He saddled a horse for himself, then, undisputed by Beaumont's man, and headed for the dam. In spite of all he faced, there was a sense of freedom within himself, a completely indifferent feeling toward the woman he left behind. It seemed to him to be the first moment of his complete maturity, with all the interest of his future life centered in a girl somewhere in the canyon, a girl who had tackled mining to escape being a waitress, and this was a glow at the very heart of his being.

THE SOUNDS of shooting came to him, a raveling of gunfire that peaked up into an angry clangor. He gigged his horse, urging it to a faster pace, riding boldly across country with the sagebrush streaking by. The other attack had been spurious, but he knew that this was the real thing. It would involve not a handful but a multitude of enraged men. Calamity was in command.

As he neared the canyon's yawning mouth, he brought his heaving horse to a stop and swung down. Leaving it tethered to a sage clump, he ran forward, his gun drawn, his face set. This was a grim twist, he thought. Events had thrown him into a situation where he had to oppose men with whom he sympathized, supporting those he wanted to see defeated. But the assault on the dam had to be stopped. There was no way out of the dilemma.

The gunfire directed against the dam was bristling. He saw that it came from well up on the talus slopes where secure positions had been obtained. The grinding noise in the background told him that a mob waited farther down the canyon. Miners who probably were armed with clubs and axes crouched there until the chance came to storm forward.

Chap crawled toward a figure that lay stretched on top the dam. The man was using a pistol. As if sensing approach on his left, he lifted his head and gave a stare Chap's way.

He exclaimed, "Good god—Chapman!"

Chap felt the same shock, for it was Monty Beaumont. He understood. When the showdown had crowded him, Beaumont had dropped his pretense of being on the miners' side and thrown in openly with

his previously secret partners to help defend the dam. It was an added twist of irony to Chap when he dropped into place beside the man.

"I don't know how you cut it," Beaumont called. "But if you live through the next thirty minutes, you've got a charmed life. If you don't, you can thank your little lady friend."

"Heard all about it from her—and she's no friend of mine."

Chap saw that the gambler's estimate of the time left to them was accurate, for the miners had no intention of letting the fight wear on. The men positioned on the canyon walls were inching forward steadily. Miners farther back kept up such a withering fire that progress could not be stopped. They were getting set to make their rush. They would make it. Chap knew that. So did Beaumont, Trecher and Jones and the men who still stuck by them. They fought desperately and more for survival now than to effect their schemes.

Somewhere below a voice ripped out, "All right, boys—let's end this business!"

There was no half hearted fumbling this time. A shout of approval rocked back and forth along the canyon walls. It swept down the canyon and grew in terror as it swelled. A great roar drowned out the gunfire, the grinding utterance of a thousand angry throats.

Chap repressed a groan but still could not bring himself to seek an actual target for his sights even though they were now present everywhere he looked, men running forward, boldly, disdainfully. Other guns on the dam top caught them, and miners fell. But it was like a straw plucked here and there from a long edge of grass. And Chap kept shooting high, hoping that the flash and noise would help dissuade them.

Then something warned him to take a look to his right. Monty Beaumont had twisted around toward him and half risen, as if to flee. But something rose in the man that had to be done before he fled.

He yelled, "This is what she cost you, Chapman!" and his gun was chopping down.

Chap had no choice but to flip his gun about, this time shooting to kill. He saw Beaumont's body jerk, go down, ending the furor involving Lorinda Luce. Beyond the fallen man, Bulldog's voice roared, "Hey—hey—what's this?"

But it was too late for Bulldog Jones to make his break for freedom, too late for Branch Trecher and the men who had continued to side them. The rush of the miners had become an open charge. Their angry yelling was echoed for what seemed miles down the disputed canyon. A bitter hand-to-hand struggle began immediately.

Chap saw Bulldog go down and stay down. He saw Trecher make a desperate run, then pitch headlong. Then Chap was himself down under piling men.

He did not understand why they had not sought his life, as well. But there was less disorder than he had expected. The miners were in complete command, they kept piling onto the dam. But nobody tried to open the gates, and he decided that they meant to force him to do that.

He was hauled to his feet, a man holding him by either backstretched arm. He saw her working her way through the crowd toward him, Connie Racine.

Coming up, she panted, "Thanks, boys, for going easy with him when I know you still don't believe me. But he's on our side. At least he wasn't on the other side."

"Hell, he wasn't!" somebody bawled. "What do you call his shootin' at us, Connie? I seen the son up here, blazing away with his coyote pardners. I say it's time to string him up! Wasn't he the one who took the high hand right down the line?"

"No!" Connie pleaded. "Dave—Jim—Ted—! You've got to believe me!"

"You went sweet on him, Connie," the man retorted. "Us boys watched it happen in you. I'm sorry about that. Any girl who can do a man's job the way you did deserves

better than that. But that's a woman for you. When they fall it's as apt as not to be some polecat who ain't fit to touch her boot."

"Listen to me!" Connie protested. "He promised—!"

"They promise a woman the world, girl. You deny you're sweet on him?" the men demanded.

"If you mean am I in love with him, the answer is yes, Jack. But you pay me no compliment when you claim I can't read a man."

"Then read this 'un for us. It looks like we never been to school." Only facts could sway them.

The miners close enough to hear the exchange pressed forward, and cold fear touched Chap's heart. He knew that his fate was entirely in Connie's hands. He had thrilled to her admission of love, and now he wanted desperately to live to claim that love, to justify that trust. He listened eagerly.

"Wait!" Connie cried. "I told you what he promised, and I begged you not to attack. But you did. If you go ahead like a bull butting a barrel, you're going to regret it sooner than you think. Let him take charge and do what he said he would do, but doing it his way. Most of you have sense enough to know he's the only one who can water the Tunnel without doing more damage than good." Her voice pleaded for justice.

"I don't trust him," a new voice called. "Not anybody who was on that side." The men agreed.

"All right," Connie retorted. "Do you trust me?"

"That's different."

"Then I give you my promise that Chap Chapman will put water in the gulch for us. I pledge my life on it. Is that enough for you?"

"Enough for me, Connie," said somebody else. Then an echo rumbled over the eager crowd.

Chap was soon released. Hostility had run against him too recently for these men to be friendly so soon. But they cleared the dam top. Soon he found himself alone with Connie and Joe Dupont, the honorable camp alcalde.

"Looks like you're the only one left, Chapman," the alcalde said. "Now, wait a minute, Connie! I'm only talking about the men who were pardners in the dam. Jones, Trecher and Beaumont are dead. But I understand the three cowmen on the lower flat have an interest in this dam. What if they balk, Chapman? It'd sure get you lynched, and maybe Connie, too." A few minutes passed in thoughtful silence. Chap finally began to speak.

"They'll go along with me," Chap said grimly, "or there's a passle of boarder steers they can find other range for. But it won't take threats. They're good men. But, look. You've got to understand that we had the prior claim to the water I'll put through to you. I hope you appreciate it enough to take steps to prevent the same thing happening next summer."

"If you'll show us how," the alcalde promised. "We'll work with you every way we can." He left them.

Chap looked at Connie for a long moment, then said, "I never heard anything I liked better than what you told these men."

"About your being trustworthy?" she asked.

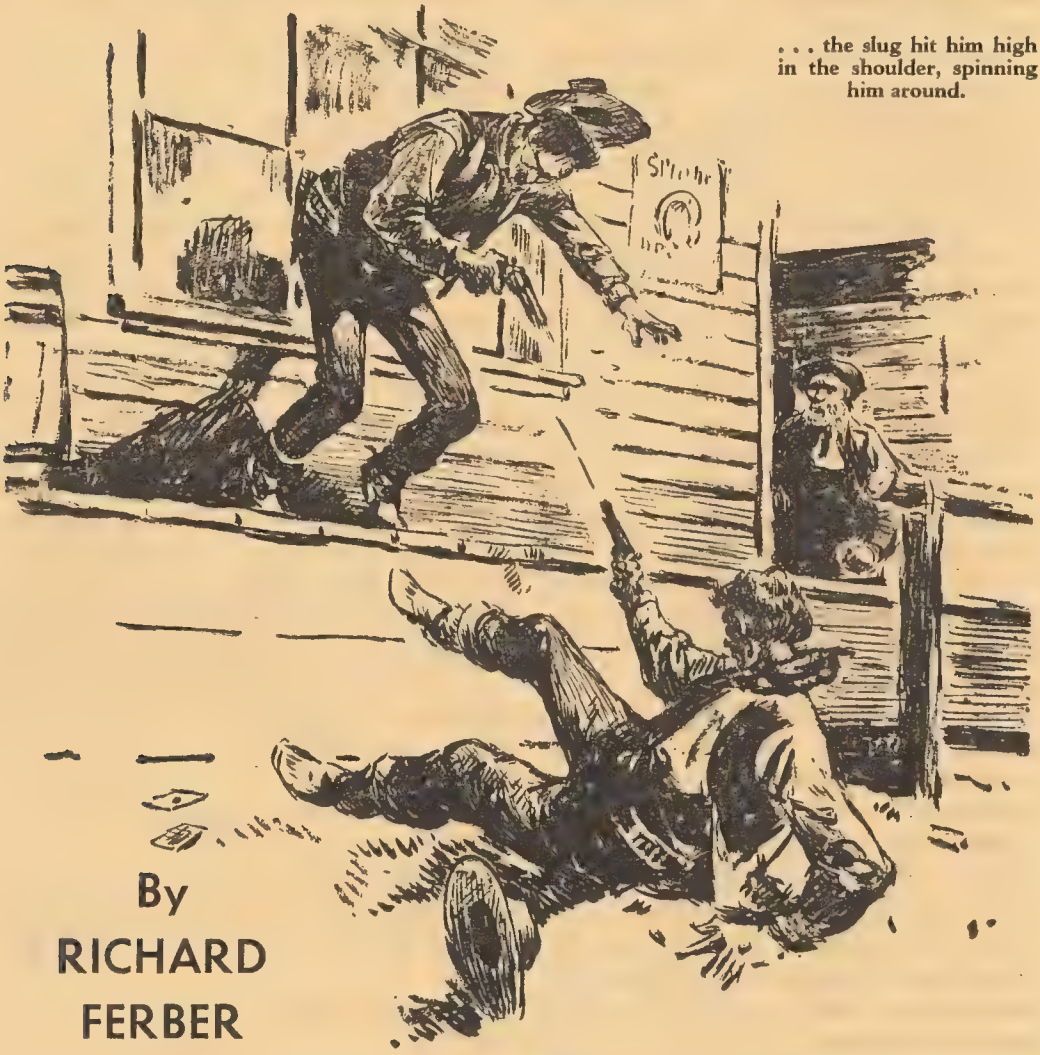
"About your loving me. You told me you came here hoping you'd never have to wait tables again. I sure hope you don't feel the same way about going back to a cattle ranch."

"Depends on the circumstances," Connie said.

"I want you to come and live in The Hole with me as my wife." He held his arms out to her.

"Entirely satisfactory." Connie breathed, approaching to him. Yes, this conclusion was entirely satisfactory. ♠ ♠ ♠

Guns of the Lost



. . . the slug hit him high in the shoulder, spinning him around.

By RICHARD FERBER

Gunfire had scarred the life of Frank Childress and he vowed bulletless peace forever. But a graze-hungry owlhoot brought Frank's holster out of storage and murder reared its black shadow to set a Colt .44 blazing just once more!

FRANK CHILDRESS had just finished the noon meal. He went outside and walked as far as the log barn and stopped there in the shade, surveying the land as it rolled away from him. Fifty yards off the creek ran almost dry now under the summer heat. He rolled a cigarette and thought of going down there to the deeper shade of the river willows, but he decided against it. The new fence stood on the far side of the stream bank, unfinished.

He was a tall man, still young, with the first signs of age coming to his face. Here and there a grey streak showed through the sandiness of his hair. The skin was taut across his cheeks and burned a deep tan by the valley sun. Leaning slack-muscled against the barn, he could feel the dead weight of tiredness and he smiled in satisfaction. He crushed the cigarette under his bootheel, glanced back at the door of the cabin where his wife had come to slosh a bucket of water, and was just starting toward the fence when he saw the dust rising in the distance. He kept walking and thought nothing of it until he stopped again near the fence. The dust cloud grew larger, billowing almost straight upward on the breathless grassland, and from where he stood he could see the wagon road and knew that no buckboard was coming. He turned to look at his wife and saw the paleness of worry on her face, and when he swung back the herd had topped the hill and had started down the other side, coming straight at the fence in a long, compact line.

They slowed when they saw the fence, and for a moment it seemed that they might veer away. But the riders pressed in more closely and the drag began to pile up and Childress stepped back as the mill started. Running for the protection of the barn, he could hear the cracking of the fence and the high, shrill whooping of the riders. Once inside the building he looked back, but by then he could see nothing but the dust, and it seemed only an instant before they were gone. He stepped outside again and saw that the two men had pulled up in the yard, waiting for him.

One of the men was Jess Anderson; Childress recognized the Bar A owner's son. The other was Coley Briggs, the Bar A foreman.

"Sorry about that," Briggs said without checking back his smile. He was a big man with a forward-jutting jaw and a nose that lay pressed against his face. Steel-blue eyes twinkled under his massive eyebrows.

Childress said nothing. He let his gaze sweep about the yard and felt the pulsing anger. His wife was still in the doorway, but the bucket had fallen from her hand. He could see where one of the cows had torn down the clothes line and beyond that the flattened rows of near-ripe corn. And the fence. He didn't have to look at the fence; he knew how that would be.

"Sorry about that," Briggs said again.

"Sure," Childress told him. He met the onset of the man's stare.

Briggs shook his head sadly. "The trouble is, them cattle is creatures of habit. They're so used to goin' one way, a fence don't seem to stop 'em none."

The anger tightened in Childress' stomach. He said, "That was no accident, Briggs. A man doesn't push a herd that way, not unless he figures on stampedin' them."

Briggs threw a glance at the young Anderson. "Why, you reckon we was pushin' them cows too fast, Mr. Anderson?"

Jess Anderson folded his hands on the saddle horn and looked thoughtful. "I don't know," he said. "That Parkman, he's an awful green hand."

"Mind me to speak to that boy," Briggs answered, chuckling. "Course, that don't help Childress, here. Takes a lot of trouble to build another fence."

"I'll build it," Childress said evenly.

"Sure you will," Briggs said. He stiffened in the saddle and reined in closer to Childress. "And you know what's gonna happen when you do. Them ornery cows are gonna knock it down again. And I sure hate to see it happen."

"Get out of here, Briggs," Childress said, his voice shaking.

"All right, neighbor." Briggs lifted the reins and motioned to Anderson. He tilted his hat to the woman as he went by the cabin and then the horses broke into a run toward the disappearing herd. Child-

ress watched them until they were out of sight. The dust still lingered in the air and he spit it from his mouth and walked slowly to the doorway.

In the kitchen he sat down and waited silently while his wife poured the coffee. From the windows he could see the creek and the far bank where the fence had been. He drew his gaze from the window and stared down at the coffee.

"What are you going to do, Frank?" Miriam asked quietly.

He shifted in the chair so that he could look up at her. She was a tall woman with long, flowing hair. He had always thought her different from the other women in the valley, the dowdy, worn-out nesters' wives. She was younger and prettier, but he felt no satisfaction in that now. He said somewhat testily, "You heard me tell Briggs. I'm going to build that fence again."

Miriam returned to the stove and spoke with her back toward him. "And they'll tear it down again. You know that!"

"Maybe," Childress said. "That's the chance we've got to take. We knew we'd have trouble when we came here. All of us knew. It was bound to happen sooner or later."

She swung back from the stove and Childress thought he detected a note of anger in her voice. "That doesn't mean you have to take it lying down," she said. "It doesn't mean you can't fight."

He didn't answer her. His fingers drummed on the table top, and the noise was loud in the room and he stopped it. He listened for the sound of her working at the stove and he knew that her talk wasn't finished. It had been coming on gradually, day by day, and now, sitting there, he clenched his teeth against it.

"Sometimes I think a gun would be better," she said suddenly. "Sometimes I wish. . . ." She stopped, letting her voice trail off.

"You know how I feel about that," he said wearily. "We've talked about it before." He brought his hands up and dropped them to the table again. "We came here to get away from that. I'll not. . . ."

"All right!" she interrupted him. A kettle made a loud clanging on the stove, drowning out his words. He shifted in the chair to look at her, but her back was still turned.

"Anyway, there's a meeting tonight, at the store," he tried lamely. "We'll figure something out then."

"All right," she said again, and he could see that she was through talking. He shrugged and stood up, moving toward the door. At the opening he stopped and said, "You can go along if you like. I think the other women will be there."

She didn't answer him. He stood for a moment, waiting, and then went outside. It was past noon and the heat lay heavy in the valley. He walked to the creek and found the pick and shovel undamaged, and in a few minutes had started to work on the fence again.

It was dark by the time the last nester had pulled his wagon into Fallon's Street and gone inside the store. The smoke was thick in the room, mingling with the smell of harness leather and the stench of rot-gut booze.

"We can't let this go on," Clem Purdy was saying. "Allen's cow dead, and a fence torn down at the Childress place." His voice rang throughout the low-ceilinged interior of McKenna's store. McKenna himself stood behind the little bar and looked uneasily about, as though expecting Anderson or some of the other cattle men at any moment. Frank Childress leaned on the plank opposite him, his eyes going from the whiskey to the storekeeper's face. Most of the men were gathered there, standing, the few chairs reserved for the women at the other side of the room. Childress glanced at his wife and caught her smile. He returned it and let his eyes

linger on her for awhile. Watching her, he felt the easy contentment that he always knew in her presence. He sipped at the hot, raw liquor and only half-listened to Purdy's talk.

"So, as I figure it, there's only one thing to do," Purdy went on. "There ain't a sheriff within two hundred miles of this valley. And even if there was, it wouldn't do us no good. The only law I ever seen around here was standing in with the ranchers." He paused while the agreement flowed quietly through the room. There was only one dissenter. Shad Perkins pushed himself away from the bar.

"There's the army," he announced timidly.

Purdy shook his head. "No," he intoned. "They ain't comin' up here to choose sides in a feud. Only to back up the law."

"There ain't no law," a man spoke up.

"That's just it," Purdy answered patiently. "And it's about time there was. There's three of us for every cowman in this valley, and it's time we protected our interests."

"We all know that," someone said. "The thing is, how?"

Purdy straightened up from the table and hooked his thumbs in the top of the canvas pants. He eyed the crowd importantly. "With a sheriff," he said. "What's to stop us from votin' in a sheriff for the basin? Once we do that, we got law when trouble comes. And we got help from the army if we need it."

The crowd was still. Here and there a man shuffled his feet, but most of them stood quietly and turned the words over in careful deliberation. The response came slowly. A man said, "That's right" and another one joined in until only the women were silent. And McKenna. He shook his head and kept his eyes fixed on the heavy door.

Purdy banged the table with his fist and caused a tin cup to jump and clatter. "All right, all right," he called unsuccessfully. His voice rose above the rumble of the crowd. Near the door a half-grown boy woke up and rubbed his eyes against the stinging smoke. Purdy shouted again, this time in irritation. The noise gradually subsided. "I take it most of you are in favor of this. If you ain't, you've got your chance to say so. . . ."

No one spoke. Purdy continued. "Then as near as I can see, there's only two things we got to figure out: when we're gonna hold this election, and who we figure on electing."

The men watched Purdy for a moment, expecting him to keep on. When he didn't they turned hesitantly to their neighbors and exchanged furtive glances. Leaning against the bar, Childress felt the weight heavily on one elbow and shifted to the other, and as he did so found Doc Carothers staring at him. The Doc was a little drunk, but it showed only in his eyes. He was a small, frail-limbed man who looked somehow out of place in the dusty overalls and the worn, faded shirt. He regarded Childress now with a cold, searching eye, and without taking his glance away spoke to the gathering. "There's Frank, here," he said casual-voiced. "It seems he might have the experience."

The men swung around to view Childress, some of them moving away from the bar to get a better look. Childress had his back half-turned to them and he kept it that way. He could feel Miriam's eyes on him, and the other women's, and he picked up the glass of whiskey hurriedly and drank it. He set it down and brought his gaze to Carothers' face, and the Doc glanced away.

Purdy left the table and came forward. "What about, it Frank?" he asked.

Childress turned. His glance narrowed, bringing the wrinkles to the corners of his eyes. He shook his head. "No, Purdy. That's not for me."

Purdy shoved his way further into the crowd so that he stood in front of Child-

ress. "What the Doc says is right."

"Right or not," Childress interrupted him. "You're talkin' to the wrong man."

Embarrassment colored Purdy's face. He took a step back and glanced around him. He spoke quietly, with a trace of indignation in his tone. "We were only askin', Frank. Seems like a man would be willing to do his share. And it's like we all know. There ain't a man of us here that's handy with a gun. We heard that you. . . ." He caught the change in Childress' eyes and stopped. His glance fell and came up again, and then he backed slowly away.

"Course, it ain't none of our business," he added as he moved toward the table. By the time he got there he had recovered himself. He cleared his throat. "We'll get on with this meeting," he said uncertainly. "I don't know that it matters, anyway. Any man we elect as sheriff, he ain't gonna be alone. Ain't that right, boys?"

The voices rose in agreement and Purdy waited for the quiet to return. He waved his hand in the air. "Now there ain't no sense in electing a man that don't want the job. The man that does, all he's got to do is step forward."

The muttering stopped and the group along the bar could hear a soft chugging sound as Doc Carothers poured more whiskey into his glass. The kid near the door stood up and came to the edge of the crowd and stared openly at the men's faces. No one else moved. Sylvester, the boy's father, tried to motion the kid away, but the kid didn't see it. His mouth hung open expectantly.

Finally, Mrs. Sylvester whispered angrily, "Jerry, go sit down," and the kid turned reluctantly and went back to the door.

The woman's words left the silence heavier in the air. Then Shad Perkins stepped timidly away from the bar again and raised a tentative hand in the direction of Purdy.

Purdy saw it and for a moment ignored it. His eyes moved over the faces of the other men. At last he said regretfully, "What is it, Shad?"

"Well, Mr. Purdy," Shad began. His gaze dropped to the toes of his boots as though he could find there what he wanted to say. He was a short, soft-muscled man who spoke little. He looked at his wife now, as though to gain assurance, and the words blurted suddenly from his mouth. "Mr. Purdy, I'd like the job." He looked down at his boots again. "That is, if you'd want me."

"Why sure," Purdy said, "Why sure," and kept repeating it. The man next to Perkins slapped his back and another one took his hand and pumped it briskly. "To the new sheriff," someone said, and lifted a bottle. Behind the plank McKenna watched the crowd shove forward to congratulate the man. While their backs were turned he gathered up the bottles and the empty glasses. He waited until the noise had subsided, then caught Purdy's attention.

"Now that you got your business settled, Purdy," he said, "I'd like to close up."

"Of course," Purdy told him. "Of course."

"It ain't that you're not welcome to use my store," McKenna explained. "It's just that Anderson and his men are in the habit of droppin' in later at night. I been in this valley a long time, long before any of you . . . uh, farmers came here, and I got to protect my business."

The men understood. They drank up quickly and began helping the women with their coats. Childress slipped into the cowhide parka and went outside, Doc Carothers following him. They waited until Miriam appeared, then crossed the street and climbed to the seat of the buckboard.

It was eight miles to Childress' one hundred and sixty acres and another three to Carothers' place. They rode silently

against the faint, warm wind that had started up across the valley. Hunched on the seat, Childress wished the Doc had come in on his own horse, instead of stopping at the house and riding in on the buckboard. He liked Carothers, but he was in no mood for his preaching, or the long, meaningful silences that the Doc sometimes maintained. They had gone four miles and crossed the dry creek before Carothers finally began to talk.

"I suppose I owe you an apology," he said somewhat bitterly.

"It doesn't matter," Childress answered.

Sitting between them, Miriam was silent. Doc took out his pipe and packed it and had a hard time lighting it against the wind. "I guess you folks kind of wonder why everybody calls me 'Doc'," he said unexpectedly. He got the pipe lighted finally and took a few deep puffs to keep it going. "If they don't see you practicing, most folks figure the Doc is just a nickname. But it ain't so with me. I was a real doctor once, though it's been ten years and I've forgot most. I killed my wife. Didn't mean to. It was just a mistake, and they told me it could have happened to anybody. But I never seen it that way. I ain't practiced medicine since."

"I didn't know," Childress said.

"I'm sorry," Miriam spoke for the first time.

"I ain't askin' for sympathy," Carothers said. He laughed a little. "It's been too long. But I got to thinkin' about puttin' you up for sheriff. I shouldn't have done that. It's like me and doctoring. I guess I wouldn't touch a dying man, no matter how hard you asked me. Seems like maybe you feel the same way about being a sheriff."

"You're figurin' too much, Doc," Childress said irritably.

"Yes, I reckon so. I'm an old man and I talk too much," Carothers said. He didn't speak after that.

At the cabin Carothers unhitched the team and led it into the barn. When he came out again Carothers had pulled himself into the saddle of the old mare and was ready to finish the ride to his own place. Miriam had gone into the house and the kitchen lamp was lighted. Childress said, "Goodnight, Doc," and started toward the door, but Carothers stopped him.

"You reckon Perkins will make a good sheriff, Frank?" he asked.

"As good as any man," Childress told him.

"And you ain't fixin' to change your mind?"

"I told Purdy. I'm telling you."

Carothers moved the horse closer in the darkness. "Frank, whatever a man rides away from, it don't seem like he can ever ride far enough."

"Goodnight, Doc," Childress said again, and walked away. At the door he stopped, listening to the sound of the slow-moving mare as she turned onto the wagon road. He went inside and turned down the wick of the lamp until it went out. His wife was already in bed and he undressed in the darkness and lay down beside her. He waited for her to speak and by the unevenness of her breathing he knew she was awake. But she said nothing, and he lay awake a long time himself, listening to the wind rustling through the trampled rows of corn.

It was a week before Childress ran out of nails for the new fence. In the late afternoon he hitched up the team and without speaking to his wife made the eight-mile ride into town. The sun was beginning to dip behind the hills when he got there, but there were no shadows in the street. The town of Fallon was less than a block long, with only three buildings on the one side of the street. McKenna's General Store stood tall and unpainted, and next door was the fresh-painted front of the feed warehouse. Beyond that a man had set up a leanto to trade for hides and had since departed. Childress tied up in front of it

and walked the long sidewalk of the warehouse to the store.

There were nearly a dozen ponies at the hitch rack and he checked them over before going inside. Above the door someone had tacked a sign,

ELECTION . . . . AUGUS

The batwings creaked loudly and the men sitting at the table looked up. They were all Anderson men . . . old man Anderson himself, and the kid, and Coley Briggs, the foreman, and a couple of others. At the bar stood Purdy and Shad Perkins and the Doc. Childress crossed to the plank immediately without throwing them more than a moment's glance.

Purdy nodded and the Doc said, "Hello, Frank."

Childress returned the greeting and spoke to McKenna. "I'll have whiskey, Mac, and I'll need some nails."

McKenna set up a bottle and glass. "For fencing?" he asked.

"For fencing," Childress said.

He poured the whiskey and drank it slowly. Behind him the men at the table were in muted conversation. Glancing at Purdy, Childress saw the man's nervousness. He was watching Jed Anderson's huge figure in the splintered mirror at the back of the bar. Anderson stood up then, and carrying a bottle, came over. He towered above Purdy, a big-framed man with the fat beginning to show around his middle.

"Have a drink, Purdy," he said good-naturedly. He set the bottle on the bar and slid it towards Purdy's glass. Purdy looked at it without reaching out.

"Go ahead," Anderson urged him pleasantly. "I never did like a sod-buster, but I always admired a man with civic spirit."

Purdy took the bottle and poured a drink.

"Yes, sir," Anderson went on. "Real civic minded. Gonna have an election tomorrow and everything."

Purdy brought the drink to his mouth and sipped at it. He was about to set it down again when Anderson's great hand came up and sent the glass crashing into his face. Purdy reeled back, grasping his nose. He recovered quickly and began to wipe the whiskey from the front of his shirt.

Anderson laughed and then his face grew serious. "There's only one thing you didn't figure, Purdy," he said, bending toward him. "Tomorrow there's gonna be an election, but it's gonna be my man that's voted in." He turned, pointing at Coley Briggs. "You're looking at the new sheriff, Purdy."

Purdy said nothing. Anderson shouted for another glass and McKenna came up and gave it to him. He poured a drink and pushed it at Purdy. He said, "Let's have a drink, Purdy, to the new sheriff."

The cattleman had his back to Childress, but Childress could see his hand tighten on the bar. He said, "That's enough, Anderson," and stiffened and the man pivoted around.

"What?"

"I said, that's enough," Childress told him calmly. "Purdy likes his whiskey inside, not all over his face."

Briggs got up from the table, the other men following him. They sensed a fight and crowded around Anderson. Briggs moved to one side so that he stood a few feet from Childress' shoulder. He hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and swayed back a little. "You know who you're talkin' to, squatter?" he said, his voice rising on the last word.

"I know," Childress answered.

"No, I don't think you do," Briggs said, moving closer.

"Take it easy, Cole," Anderson stopped him. "That man's some tough."

"You don't say?" Briggs had moved until he was only a few feet from Childress now. His eyes widened in mock surprise.

"Met a fella from Hays City," Anderson went on. "He told me this Childress was all hell in that town."

"My god," Briggs said. He made as though to back up and then halted again. "My god. I'm sure glad I found out. I almost had a run-in with this killer the other day." He turned and yelled at McKenna. "Mac, bring me a sack of nails. A big sack."

"What kind of nails?" McKenna asked.

"How the hell do I know? Nails for makin' fences. Do you think I'd know that?"

The men laughed, but then lapsed into silence as McKenna went about pouring the nails into a cloth sack. It took a minute, and no one moved except Carothers. The men could hear the neck of the bottle striking nervously against the glass as the Doc poured a drink. Childress kept his eyes on Brigg's face and without thinking his hand slipped to his side. There was no gun there, he realized with a start. It was strange how long it took a man to forget.

McKenna walked over with the sack of nails and handed it to Briggs and walked quickly away. Briggs looked down at it and tested its weight by bouncing it in his hands. "I'm sure sorry about that fence, mister," he said humbly. "I don't know how I'm gonna make it up to you, but I'm sure gonna try." He lifted his gaze for an instant and it was the only warning Childress had. The sack caught him in the stomach and sent him doubling over, and before he could straighten Briggs' fist crashed into his jaw. He slammed back against the bar and for a moment wavered as Briggs moved in on him.

The man stepped in clumsily and Childress ripped him with two punches to the head and then a driving right that knocked him backwards. He came in again, swinging wildly, and Childress' blow stopped him and another one sent him staggering away. He hit against the table and slumped down and for an instant sat there, the blood filling his eyes. Then he got up slowly, using the table for support, and took a step forward.

"Give him a gun," he said hoarsely. "Give him a gun."

Anderson smiled and brought the Colt out of his holster. He spun it along the bar so that it struck up against Childress' hand. Briggs stood crouched over, his palm resting against the butt of his own gun. "I won't wait all day," he said, the anger shaking him.

Childress' glance ran from Briggs to the other men. He saw Carothers work around the group, trying for a better look. And he knew what the Doc expected of him. One shot might stop this thing right now, stop Anderson and the rest of the cattlemen in the valley. They'd think twice about tearing down a nester's fence, or killing a milch cow, or burning down a barn like they did at the Chandler place. He could see in Doc's eyes what they wanted from him. . . . one shot, just one, in the man's belly. He brought his gaze away from Carothers and faced Briggs. His hand remained motionless.

"You're looking at the wrong man, Briggs," he said quietly. "I don't want trouble from you."

The tension left Brigg's body. He looked at Childress uncertainly. He turned, throwing Anderson a questioning glance.

"I guess that fella was wrong, Cole," Anderson laughed. "I guess this ain't the man they talked about in Hays."

"It don't seem likely," Briggs answered. The anger had left him and he smiled good-humoredly.

Anderson motioned to the men and walked to the door. He stopped there, waiting for the punchers to file past him. "Don't forget that election tomorrow," he called. He was about to turn away and then halted, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Course, I wouldn't blame you much if you didn't show up. I figure Briggs will be plenty mad if he don't win that star."

The batwings creaked when he went out, and afterwards the place was silent. Childress waited until he heard the Bar A men ride clear of the street. Glancing down he saw the sack of nails lying unbroken on the floor and he picked it up and quickly left the store. Outside it was almost dark and by the time he turned the team back down the street, a light had gone on in McKenna's. The paper sign over the door rustled in the breeze, but by then it was too dark to read the words.

The next morning Childress sat at the rough-hewn table and watched the sun slanting in the kitchen window. The coffee had turned cold in the cup, but he drank it without noticing. Outside the milch cow let out a bawling in the corral and his wife turned from the stove.

"You'd better get the team ready, if we're going," she said.

"What?" he asked, not hearing her.

"The election. You're going, aren't you?"

He didn't answer. Far down the wagon road he could hear the sound of hoofbeats and he stood up, going to the door. He could see the dust, but he couldn't identify the men until they turned into the yard and reined up. Purdy and Doc Carothers stepped from their saddles, but the other two men stayed where they were. There was blood on Carothers' jacket and more blood on his wrist that showed where his sleeve was rolled up. Purdy spoke first; he was panting and the sweat rolled freely down his face.

"It's Perkins, Frank," he said, and paused to get his breath. "We went into Fallon early. Briggs was there. He shot him in the stomach."

"Perkins?" Childress asked, and looked at Carothers.

"That's right," Carothers answered. "He's got a chance, though. Lost a lot of gut."

Childress studied the old man, remembering Carothers' words the night of the meeting at the store. Doc had said he would never practice medicine again, but the blood on his vest now said otherwise. He wondered about it, but only for a moment, then pushed the thought aside. "I'm sorry about that," he said, addressing Purdy. "I hope he gets well."

"He'll get well," Doc cut in, "But not soon enough."

"How's that?" Childress asked. Already he had made a half-turn, trying to move away.

"The election's at one o'clock. With Perkins out, we need another man. I told Purdy it wouldn't do no good coming here, but he wouldn't listen."

"You want me?"

"Ain't nobody else now, Frank. Perkins was the only man we had."

"I told you before."

"I said that."

"Is this your final word?" Purdy said coldly.

Childress looked at him and saw the hatred grow steadily in the man's eyes. He shrugged and let out a deep sigh. "That's my final word," he said, and swung away from them, walking toward the house.

Miriam was in the doorway and she stepped aside to let him pass. Purdy climbed back to the saddle and joined the two men. "You coming, Doc?" he called.

"I guess not. I'll be in later," Carothers said. He led the mare to the barn and crouching down in front of it began to load his pipe.

Childress was sitting at the table again when Miriam went back into the kitchen. He looked up at her, but he didn't speak.

"Frank," she said. "You've got to go."

He shook his head. "No, let them get somebody else to do their killing for them. I've done my last."

"Can't you ever forget?"

"Would you?" he shouted. Rage drove him upward so that his legs jarred against the table. He stepped clear and looking down saw the coffee cup and sent it spin-

ning to the floor. "Would you?" he said again, his voice lowering. "If it was your brother, how soon would you forget?"

"It was your job, Frank," she said kindly.

"I figured that way, too . . . before. Afterwards, it was different. It didn't mean anything then."

"All right, Frank," she said, and by her voice he could tell she was through.

He sat down and rested his head in his hands. He tried not to think, but the thoughts came to him without control. And suddenly he could see the street of Hays City, and a man . . . himself . . . but a man that he somehow didn't know . . . a man with a star on his vest and a gun. And the other man, the kid who was his brother. He remembered how the kid looked when the bullet had hit him in the stomach. And how he, Frank Childress, had kept saying, "It's my job. It's my job," over and over. Now he could hear the words again, only they were coming from someone else . . . from his wife, and Purdy, and Doc Carothers and all the rest of them.

"I've killed my last man," he said aloud, and let his hands drop, spreading them flat on the table. His wife didn't answer, but she didn't have to. He knew what she was thinking, that the incident in Hays had made a coward out of him, that a man couldn't go all his life avoiding a fight because of one thing that he couldn't help. He turned and glanced at her and thought for a moment that she was going to speak. He wished she would now, but she only looked at him, her eyes telling him all he had to know. He got up from the table and went past her, and outside.

At the door he stopped, staring down at the hunched figure of Carothers. "That blood. You said you'd never practice again."

"I said that," Carothers answered. "But I was talkin' to myself. What I told you was that a man can only run so far and so long."

"I see," Childress said quietly, nodding.

"I hope so," Doc said, standing up. "Only some times it takes longer. It took me ten years. A man can crawl into a hole, but there ain't a hole big enough that he can't be prodded out of it someday."

Childress didn't wait for him to go on. He went into the barn and saddled and bridled the blue roan. When he was through he moved over to the corner where the harnesses hung and stooping, pried open the lid of the old chest. In the bottom he found the holster and the single-action Colt .44. Carothers stepped inside and watched him while he wiped the oil from the weapon and loaded it.

"Looks like an old gun," he remarked. "Ain't been used for a long time."

"Not for a long time, Doc," he said, and climbed to the leather. Carothers was still struggling into the mare's saddle as he turned from the yard and heeled the pony into a run.

The clock in McKenna's store window said quarter to one when Childress and the Doc reined up at the hitch rack and stepped down. A crowd had gathered on the porch around a table that the storekeeper had provided. Further down the walk Childress could see Anderson and his men, and the foreman, Briggs. Purdy left the group on the porch and came to meet them.

"I wasn't expecting you," he said to Childress, then his eyes dropped and he noted the gun. "You change your mind?" he asked uncertainly.

"I changed it," Childress said.

Purdy didn't wait to hear further. He stepped back to the sidewalk and raised his hands to the crowd. "By god, boys," he shouted. "We got a candidate. Let's vote."

The men who had been loitering in the shade of the store came out and a line began to form along the length of the porch. They moved slowly, their eyes going from Childress to the Bar A men at the corner of the warehouse. Standing to

one side, Childress watched them and saw their reluctance. Beside him Carothers said, "Keep your eye on Anderson. He ain't through yet. Not by a long shot."

"It's Briggs I'm watching," Childress told him.

"Sure."

Anderson and his men left the warehouse porch then and came along the sidewalk. They halted again near the table, Anderson and the foreman abreast of each other, and watched as the first man stepped up to cast his ballot. The Bar A owner put a hand to stop him. His eyes narrowed and he let his gaze run slowly over the crowd.

"I warned you men about this before," he said tonelessly. "You saw what happened to Perkins. The man who casts a vote here is askin' for the same thing."

"You can't stop this election," Purdy spoke up boldly. "We've got you beat now, Anderson, and you know it."

"No, Purdy. No, I don't," Anderson answered slowly. "And I'm only warnin' yuh. I can't control my men. You vote in a sheriff here, and five minutes later he'll be dead."

Purdy stood his ground, but he said nothing further. The man at the table had the quill poised and he set it down again and looked around him. Purdy hesitated and then stepped to the table and picked it up. In the silence the men could hear the pen scratching on the rough paper. The Anderson bunch watched for a moment and began drifting back along the sidewalk. Once Coley Briggs stopped and his eyes sought out Childress and took on a meaningful brightness. Childress met his stare until the man turned away. Carothers had caught the look and said, "You reckon Anderson means it?"

"He means it," Childress said. "And Briggs wouldn't miss the chance."

"No, I guess not. And they ain't even gonna bother to vote. Briggs is just waitin' to see that star on your shirt. Then he's gonna use it for a target," he concluded.

"I know," Childress said, and after that he didn't say any more.

A half hour later the last vote was cast and the ballots counted. Purdy gathered them from the table and walked over to Childress. As he did so the men began to file back into the saloon and the Bar A crew left the porch of the warehouse. Only Briggs was left standing there, his body propped loosely against the wall. Anderson stopped at the door and threw Childress a thin smile and went inside. His men followed him, and in a moment there was only Childress and Purdy on the sidewalk. Purdy held the ballots in his hand and made a helpless gesture with them. He tried to smile. He twisted and looked at Briggs from the corner of his eye and said suddenly, "Maybe this is wrong, Frank. Maybe we ought to wait." His hand was shaking and the papers made a little rustling sound in the quiet of the street.

"You got a star?" Childress asked coldly.

"Sure. Sure" Purdy fumbled in the pocket of the coat with his free hand. There was a husky nervousness in his voice. "McKenna got it for us. It's a nice star, Frank. Brand new. Brand new and shiny." He brought the star from his pocket and handed it to Childress, and then abruptly wheeled about and stepped through the batwings of the store.

Childress watched the doors swing until they finally came to a stop. He turned, facing up the street, and saw Briggs push himself away from the warehouse wall. The foreman moved to the edge of the porch and halted there, bent over a little, squinting into the sun. The rays made a brief flash on the cheap gold star as Childress lifted it to his shirt. Briggs' voice cracked through the stillness of the street.

"Put that on, mister, and you're a dead man."

(Continued on page 113)

By CHARLES BECKMAN

Ollie ran into the street, yelling and waving . . .

STAGECOACH TO HELL

Death and gunman Ollie Downs shared profits in blood until Downs demanded a prosperous life of decency . . . and Death refused to depart—alone!

THE MAN rode into the yard just before dawn that morning. He pounded on the door, rousing Ollie Towns from a sound sleep.

Groggily, Ollie pushed the covers back, fumbled for his glasses, then sat on the edge of the bed. It was very still at this early hour, except for the urgent knocking on the door.

In the thick darkness, Ollie groped on his bedside table for a sulphur match. It came alive with a splutter and he touched the flame to a candle. By its glow, he consulted his thick gold watch. Then he picked up a heavy old .45 Colt and went to the door.

"Who's there?" Ollie demanded.

"It's Jess Simms, Ollie," the man's voice came back, a harsh whisper.

For a long second, Ollie did not move a muscle. Slowly, the pent up breath whistled through his half parted lips. He gently laid the pistol down and went about opening the door. His face was gray and lined and there was a sudden tired slump to his shoulders.

He lifted the heavy bar, pulled the door in on a sigh of dry hinges. Out there, in the chilly darkness, the man was a vague shadow. Stiffly, he moved into the house and stood just inside the door.

"How 'bout some more light, Ollie? Man can't see enough to find a mule in here."

Ollie Towns returned to the table for another match. He lit a kerosene lamp, placed it in the center of the red and blue checked oil cloth spread over the kitchen table. He gathered some paper and kindling wood and started a fire in the pot-bellied iron stove. In his night shirt his thin body was shivering.

The man brought a hide bottom chair around and sat beside the table. "Well, this is more like it." The man looked around the plain little shack, at the shadows playing on the unpapered walls, the few simple furnishings.

"Cold enough to freeze the horn plumb off a man's saddle this time of the morning," the man grunted. "That fire feels good, Ollie."

Towns said, "I'll put some coffee on."

"Well, now. That'd sure hit the spot."

The rider sat beside the table with one elbow resting on the oil cloth while Ollie boiled the coffee. When a steaming mug filled to the brim with the strong, black liquid was placed before him, he picked it up and sipped at it with a loud noise, then settled back with a grateful, "Ahhh . . ."

Ollie sat on the other side of the table. The lamplight reflected from the rims of his glasses and touched the weary lines of his thin face. He sat with his hands folded in his lap as he gazed blankly at the stove.

"Didn't know you'd been livin' here three years, Ollie. Just happened to hear a soldier mention it in a saloon in El Paso. Just luck that I heard him mention your name about a week ago. When I rode in this morning, I stopped at a Mexican shack on the edge of town and asked where you lived.

"Yeah," Ollie said softly, "I been living here three years now. Don't hardly seem that long—" He looked away from the stove, at other objects in the room, then at the rider. "You heard from Ben Scobee, Jess. That's why you're here." It was a tired statement of fact, more than a question.

The rider put his cup down. "Why, yes, Ollie. I started out from El Paso late yesterday. Rode all evening and last night."

Ollie nodded. "That was mighty good of you, Jess."

The other man shrugged. "I figure it was something I owed you. A man shouldn't forget it when somebody saved his life, once."

Towns moved his hand. "Just the same, it was a fine thing to do and I want you to know I appreciate it."

"Well," the man said, rising, "I got to be riding along. Some time it don't pay for a man to be seen around a place that has law in it." He winked and grinned at Towns. At the door, he put his hand on Ollie's shoulder with a friendly gesture. "Been makin' out all right here, Ollie?"

Towns nodded. "All right, Jess." He hesitated. "I run a barber shop here."

The rider looked surprised. He said, "Well now. Is that so, Ollie!"

They stood together in the doorway for a moment. Finally, Ollie asked. "When is he coming, Jess. Do you know,"

"Yeah, Ollie. I guess I know all right. He's planning to take the early stage from El Paso this morning."

"That'd put him in here at Fort Jefferson at six o'clock, this evening," Towns murmured slowly.

"That's right." The rider pursed his lips. "Reckon there ain't no need to tell you he hasn't changed any. He's comin' here for only one thing—to kill you, Ollie."

The barber nodded. "I know. I'm not fooling myself any about that."

"Some men just won't forget a thing. He's been after you eight years, now, and he's located you again. Reckon he'll never give up. Well—" The rider put his hat on and melted into the darkness. His voice came back softly, "You plan on gettin' an early start. An' don't ever tell anybody about me comin' here." He chuckled dryly. "I don't want Ben Scobee chasin' me all over Texas."

"Course I won't," Towns promised. "And—thanks, Jess."

He stood in the darkness, listening to the creak of saddle leather, the restless scuffle of hoofs. Ollie stood there, shivering a little, gazing toward the east where the first pink tinge of dawn was showing.

Finally, Ollie closed the door. He put out the lamp and the candle, took his glasses off and laid down again, but he did not go to sleep. He stared up at the ceiling, sweating a little in spite of the chill, waiting for it to get light.

AT SEVEN thirty, Ollie Towns was dressed and walking down to the heart of the settlement. Ollie went directly to the stage coach station which was just opening. The agent was unlocking his roll top desk, preparatory to commencing the day's business.

"Mornin', Tate." the barber greeted. "That stage still go through here for Chihuahua at eleven in the morning?"

The agent sat down in his swivel chair. "Why, yes it does, Ollie. Allowin', that is, for its bein' on time, and it usually is."

Towns took out a purse, unsnapped it and shook out a pair of gold coins. "I'd like to get me a ticket."

The agent showed some surprise. "Why, I didn't know you was takin' a trip to Mexico, Ollie."

"Just a few days," Towns lied.

The agent made up the ticket. "Well," he grinned, running his fingers over his chin, "I better get me down to your place for a shave before eleven, then." He chuckled. "Fellers in this town will be lookin' like a herd of porcupines by the time you get back, Ollie."

He paid for the ticket, pocketed his change and walked out. Ollie went to his shop and unlocked the front door. Inside was his one barber chair and whittle-scarred waiting bench. Along one wall was a shelf filled with his towels and instruments. On another shelf were neat rows of individual shaving mugs, each labeled with its owner's name in fancy lettering.

Ollie looked at the row of names on the mugs, each one a good friend. It was the first time in his life he'd ever lived in a town where he had friends.

He took out his watch. A quarter of eight. In ten hours and fifteen minutes, Ben Scobee would step off the stage from El Paso. Tiny beads of perspiration suddenly dotted Ollie's forehead. His fingers trembled as he put the watch back in his vest pocket. Hurriedly, he began packing his barber tools in a carpet bag.

The bell over his front door tinkled, interrupting him before he got started good.

"Mornin', Mr. Towns," the broad shouldered young man said miserably.

Ollie put the carpet bag down and peered around the barber chair. "Oh, it's you, Jimmy. My goodness, what happened to your eye?"

Young Jimmy Dale sat in the barber chair and scowled at the deer horn hat rack on the opposite wall.

Ollie came around and examined the shiner with a professional eye. He shook his head. "Tsk, tsk. Fighting again."

"Yessir," admitted Jimmy Dale, who was eighteen and as hot headed as any young buck this side of the Pecos.

"Ginger isn't going to like this," Ollie warned him.

Jimmy blinked and swallowed. "You think I don't know it?" he blurted. "She said I needn't come around to see her if I got in one more fight."

Ginger Parker was the saucy, seventeen year old redheaded daughter of Colonel Parker, commander of the nearby fort. She was the prettiest girl in the Big Bend, and she was in love with Jimmy Dale, but she had some pretty set ideas about saloon brawling. She wanted to marry a gentleman. Ollie shook his head disapprovingly.

"It was on account of her," Jimmy defended. "I was in the Hard Luck saloon last night and one of them smart aleck soldiers made a nasty remark about her. Honest, Mr. Towns, before I knew what happened, I knocked him down, then there was a free-for-all." He leaned forward in the chair, anxiously. "Will you explain it to her, Mr. Towns? She won't believe me."

"I'll do my best, Jimmy. But she's a determined young lady."

Jimmy nodded sadly, then settled back in his chair. "Well," he said, "fix my eye, will you please, Mr. Towns? I guess that's all we can do right now."

Ollie hesitated. He consulted his watch. It was now five minutes after eight. He'd have to be packed and ready to catch that stage in two hours and fifty-five minutes. He started to tell Jimmy that he was leaving and didn't have time. But he looked at the swollen, purple mouse under the young man's left eye. He thought, *Well, it won't take long to fix the eye.*

"You sit right there, Jimmy." He hurried out back, to the bucket where he kept his leeches. He selected a large one, brought it in and let it fasten itself to the puffed area. On Monday mornings, after a howling week-end in the saloons, Ollie usually did a big business in leeches. His waiting bench was lined with soldiers and ranchers, all nursing one or two black eyes apiece.

AT THIS moment, Ollie had no thought beyond immediately getting away from Ben Scobee and his deadly guns. He knew, that before him again stretched interminable weeks of dusty stage coach travel. Sleepless nights, when every sound might be the rustle of Ben Scobee's footsteps. Then, perhaps months from now, a town somewhere in another state, many hundred miles away, where a measure of safety would return. But the fear would continue to live with him, even in that new town as the months passed. And, just as his taut nerves finally began to relax, as he began to sleep again and make friends and feel like a human being, word would come to him somehow that Ben Scobee had found him again. Then it would all start again.

His thoughts were interrupted by another tinkle at the door. This time it was a towheaded boy of about seven. The boy came over and gazed at the barber with large, tear-filled blue eyes. He twisted a finger in his patched trouser leg. "Mr. Ollie," he sniffed, "can you come right away? Ma, she's real sick with the toothache. She most died last night. She's cryin' an' carryin' on awful bad."

The barber patted the boy's cotton top reassuringly. "Plague take it," he thought, "everything's gone wrong this morning." With a sweating hand, he took out his watch. The hands pointed to eight fifteen.

Ollie looked from the leech on Jimmy Dale's eye, to the little boy, and around the shop, like a trapped animal searching for a door.

"You run on back and tell your Ma to put some warm sweet oil and turpentine on the tooth and I'll be over directly." He hurried the boy out of the shop.

The boy's mother, Mrs. Jenkins, was a widow with a brood of youngsters. Her husband, a sergeant in the army, had been killed in an Indian raid over a year ago. She did her best to feed her children by taking in sewing and washing.

With quick, harried movements, Ollie removed the leech from Jimmy's eye which now looked normal again, grabbed up his bag and hurried over to the Jenkins' place on the edge of town. It was almost nine o'clock by the time he got there.

Mrs. Jenkins, a frail woman with faded blue eyes and rough hands, was in serious pain. Her face was swollen out of all proportion by an abscessed tooth.

It took Ollie every bit of an hour to get the rotten tooth out. It broke and he had to probe for the roots. When he finished, his shirt was soggy and his face was dripping perspiration.

Mrs. Jenkins lay still on the bed, exhausted by the pain, but resting easier now. "God bless you, Mr. Towns," she whispered, touching his hand. "I was near crazy." Her eyes faltered and looked away. "I—ain't got any money in the house right now," she confessed shamefacedly. "I hate to ask you to wait, but—"

Ollie consoled quickly, "Shucks, Mrs. Jenkins, I thought we was better friends than that. You know you don't have to pay me anything," he said gruffly.

Then her eyes returned in his direction. "You're a good man, Mr. Towns," she whispered.

"By the way," Ollie said, "it ain't none of my business, but wasn't that oldest boy of yours, Frank—wasn't he going to work on the Taylor's Bar W? He's gettin' to a good size. Be shavin' soon. It'd take a heap off your shoulders if he'd start bringin' home a pay check."

"I—know," she said. She plucked at the bed quilt. "I—he'll be startin' to work real soon. Any day, now."

"Humph," Ollie grunted. He'd heard talk around town that the boy, Frank Jenkins was hanging around with that tough Red Waschick band of outlaws. From the look on the Jenkins' woman's face, it was true.

Shaking his head sadly, Ollie washed his hands, gathered up his bag and left the house. He went directly to his own shack for a bundle of his personal belongings. With the bundle under one arm and his carpet bag under the other, he started in the direction of the stage depot. Then he remembered that his ticket was still down at his shop. He hurried back and found the ticket in a drawer. He thrust it into a vest pocket with trembling hands, grabbed up his baggage and started out of the shop. But no more than he got out on the sidewalk, he heard the pound of hoofs and crack of whip leather and the Chihuahua stage came careening around a corner on its way out of town.

Ollie Towns dropped his gear and ran out into the street, yelling and waving his hands.

But the driver, his eyes stung by the wind and the cloud of powdery dust kicked up by the horses, did not see him. The barber's frantic cries were drowned by the noises of the team.

In a second the stage was gone, leaving Ollie behind.

OLLIE was shaking when he reached the stage coach depot. He ran up to the agent and caught the man's coat front in his two fists. "Why did you let them go, Tate? You knew I'd bought a ticket. Why didn't you hold them a few minutes?"

The agent's face showed his surprise at the barber's outburst. "But—but, Ollie," he gasped. "I did hold 'em, near ten minutes. You never showed up. Figured you changed your mind and would go tomorrow." He pointed at a big wall clock with a slowly moving pendulum. The heavy hands pointed to thirteen minutes after eleven.

Ollie's twitching fingers took out his

watch again. It said one mintue to eleven. "Fourteen minutes late," he whispered. "I never thought to set it. . . ."

"Shucks, it ain't nothin' to get all worked up 'bout, Ollie," the agent told him soothingly. "That ol' stage'll be goin' through here tomorrow again, this time." He winked and nudged Towns' ribs with a sly elbow. "That señorita in Chihuahua'll wait till tomorrow night."

Tomorrow at this time Ollie would be a corpse, riddled by Ben Scobee's bullets. "You—you don't understand, Tate," he whispered. "I got to get to Chihuahua before then."

The agent grunted. "Well, it beats me why you're in such an all fired hurry to git goin' but if you got it in your mind to leave today, you might talk to Alfredo Gusman, the Meskin freight hauler. He's down at the army post right now with a load of corn. Maybe you can catch a ride with him when he starts back this afternoon."

Ollie Towns hurried to the post. He found Gusman. The Mexican agreed to provide a horse for him and let him ride with the mule train for a price that was satisfactory to Ollie. However, it would be four o'clock this afternoon before the wagons were unloaded and ready to leave.

Ollie returned to his shop. It was now twelve o'clock. Ben Scobee was just six hours away. If Ollie waited to leave with the Mexican trader, he'd have only two hours start on Scobee. But he had little choice. It would be suicide for him to saddle a horse and try to ride through this Indian infested country alone.

The chill blue eyes of Ben Scobee haunted Ollie's memory. He was glad when Joe Sulley, the town's undertaker came into the shop with a chore that would take his mind off Scobee for a while.

"We've got that deputy all laid out and ready to be fixed up, Ollie. Could you come down to the place and shave him now?"

The barber nodded. "Sure, Joe. Be right along."

He went over to the row of shaving mugs. Down near the end was one that bore the name of Will Bright. With clumsy fingers, Ollie took down the mug, mixed up a good thick lather in it and walked down to the undertakers in the next block.

Shaving the dead was not a task that ordinarily appealed to Ollie Towns, though he was glad enough to do the service for his friends. Take this young deputy, Will Bright. He'd been one of Ollie's best customers and a good friend besides. He had a pretty young wife and a pair of youngsters. Ollie could remember when he had the mug fixed up with Will's name just a couple of years ago. Now Ollie was giving him his last shave. No, it was not an agreeable task—but it was not one he would have shirked because Will had been his friend, and Will would want to look nice for the last time his family and friends got to see him.

"Shame," the undertaker muttered, standing on the other side of the table, holding a lamp so Ollie could see better to work by. "Nice young feller like that. We've got to get rid of Red Waschick and his bunch or this town won't be safe for anybody."

"Pretty sure they done it, Joe?"

"No question about it. Will was the only law left around here that tried to hold them down a little. They killed in pure cold blood."

Ollie nodded. He'd heard about the killing late last night.

"Well, those outlaws'll be singin' a different tune after today, though," Joe Sulley prophesied. "Wait'll they find out who we got sent down as a government marshal to clean that bunch up!"

OLLIE felt a stir of excitement. True, he was leaving Fort Jefferson, probably forever, at four o'clock this afternoon. But his interests and feelings had been too deeply wrapped up in the town not to be concerned about it, even now.

"Did you really get Bat Masterson?" He'd heard that some of the influencial men in town were trying to get the famous lawman down here to clean up the Red Waschick bunch.

"Yup!" Joe Sulley grinned triumphantly. He moved close to the barber and spoke in confidential tones. "Don't mention it to anybody, Ollie. He's already here, in the hotel. But we don't want Red and his bunch to know. Let 'em come into town and start some hell raisin'—then they'll find out."

Ollie was glad they'd been able to get Masterson. Red Waschick would get a dose of his own medicine when that cold blooded two-gun scoundrel faced him. Bat Masterson, if anybody, could clean the town up and make it a decent place in which to live. Wistfully, Ollie wished he could stick around to watch the town and his friends grow and prosper. He felt there would be big times ahead, with the army out here to make good indians out of the Apaches, and men like Bat Masterson to clean up the lawless element. This was good cattle country, and one day the railroads would come this far.

Ollie went back to his barber shop. He cleaned his razor, dried it. Then he put Will Bright's cup on the back of the shelf where a half dozen other cups sat gathering dust—cups that would never be used again.

He took out his watch. A quarter after two. Ben Scobee would be coming down that street in search of him in less than four hours. He patted his face nervously with a handkerchief. Thinking about the people in this town and their problems had taken his mind off his own trouble for a few minutes, but now it returned to haunt him.

At two-thirty the town's other deputy came down with the request that he go to the jail and shave a prisoner. The man was going to be hanged in the morning for murder. One of his final requests had been that he be allowed to clean up and dress in his suit and have a fresh shave for the occasion.

Ollie felt a little sorry for the man as he shaved him. He was one of Red Waschick's men, but a half-witted fellow who had been made a scapegoat by the town's last sheriff. The sheriff, a spineless man, had caught the least dangerous of the Waschick gang as a half-hearted attempt to appease the townsfolk who were demanding

(Continued on page 105)

GUNS AT KILLER'S RANGE

By Richard Ferber

That day the nesters came to town, Sheriff Duff Parmer knew it'd take only one spark to set off a murderous range war—but he never guessed that the spark could be—himself!

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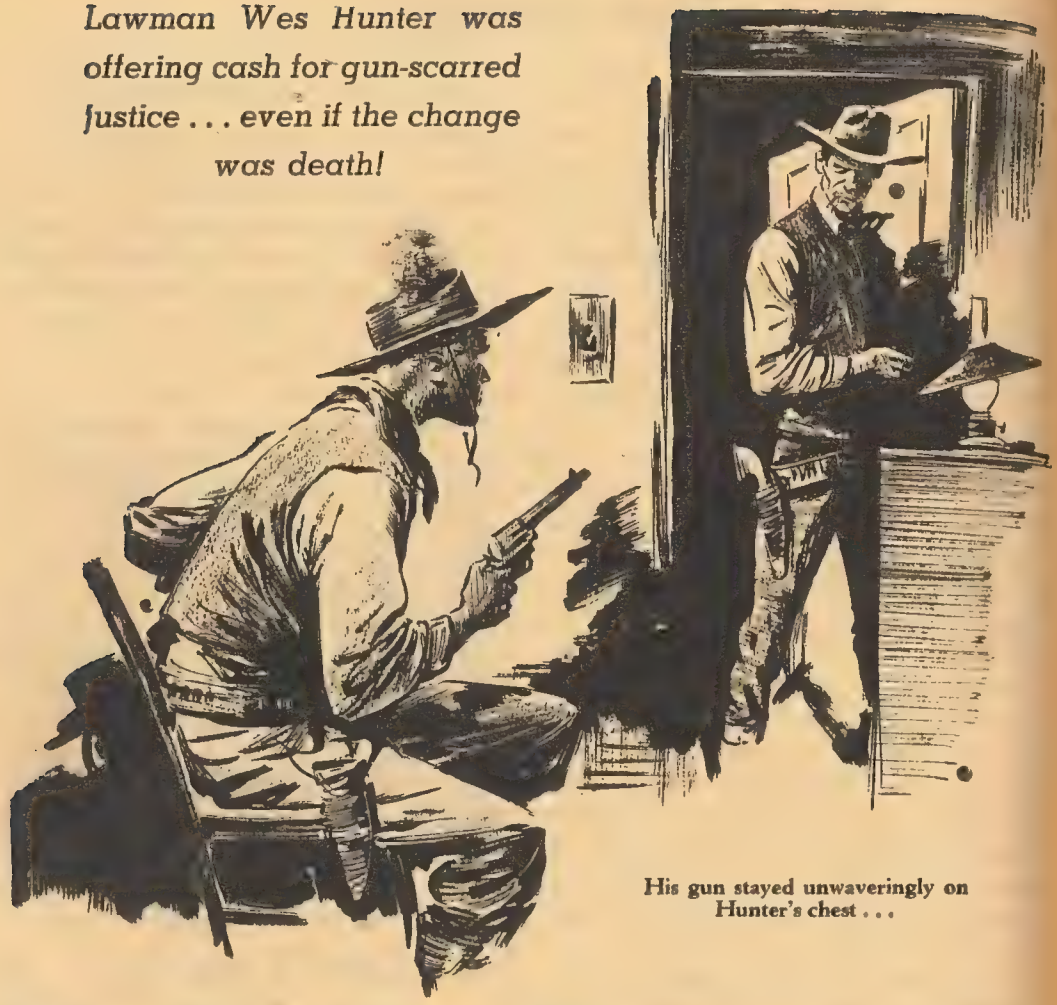
Lawman Wes Hunter was offering cash for gun-scarred justice . . . even if the change was death!



His gun stayed unwaveringly on Hunter's chest . . .

Satan's Lawman

By

A. KENNETH BRENT

IT WAS almost dark when Wes Hunter left the sheriff's office and started toward the big house at the edge of town. The man who lived in that house had sent word for him to come at eight o'clock, and it was time. Yet Hunter walked slowly up Rincon's main street. He did not quite know why, but he was reluctant to keep this appointment with Morgan Cantrell.

The remnant of a Saturday crowd was still in town, and Hunter nodded to the men he passed along the scarred plank walk. He was a man of medium build, not tall and not heavy, yet there was a solidness about him that seemed consistent with the star pinned to his shirtfront. He was a man in his early thirties, but already there was a trace of gray in his black hair.

As Hunter passed the Brandbook Saloon a man come through the doors and stumbled in front of him. Hunter caught the man and steadied him, and he recognized him as Jim Olins, a small rancher from the Oscuros west of Rincon.

"Those sidewalk boards get a little uneven after a couple of drinks, Jim," Hunter said, smiling, and started to move on.

Jim Olins caught the sheriff's arm and pulled him half around. He was a tall, spare-built man of around twenty-five, and Hunter remembered having seen him once or twice before with too much to drink. But he had never made any trouble and had always seemed able to carry his load. Now, however, he was grinning arrogantly as he kept his grip on Hunter's arm.

"The sheriff's being funny," he said. "Don't you think you ought to be out doing Morgan Cantrell's work instead of loafing around town?"

A muscle in Wes Hunter's jaw tightened. He said, "Maybe you'd better make yourself a little plainer, Olins."

The rancher leaned forward, swaying slightly. "You don't know what I mean?" he asked in mock surprise. "You mean you wasn't up in the Oscuros snooping around for Morgan Cantrell yesterday?"

A crowd of men, mostly other ranchers from the mountains, had gathered around. One of them stepped forward and grabbed Jim Olins by the shoulder.

"Shut up, you fool," the man said.

Hunter said, "Cantrell reported some cattle missing and asked me to look around. I'd do the same for any man."

Olins angrily jerked himself free of the other man's grip. "Would you now, sheriff?" he said. "Or would you maybe find a little more for Cantrell and a little less for somebody else because you're Cantrell's man?"

Hunter hit the man. It was a short, open handed blow, but Olins staggered backward and sat down heavily on the sidewalk. He made no effort to get up. Hunter stood there, head down, instantly sorry for what he had done.

"I didn't want to do that, Olins," he said. "But maybe you'd better go somewhere and sober up fast."

Hunter pushed his way through the crowd and walked on, but two mountain ranchers followed him. "Don't pay no attention to a drunk man, sheriff," one of them said. "The way you're doing your job suits us Oscuro men all right."

Wes Hunter nodded his thanks, and then Tom Forrest, the other rancher, said, "There's one thing, sheriff. Cantrell has been letting some of his cows get up on our pastures. Maybe it's an accident, maybe not. But there'll be trouble if it don't stop. We need all our grass."

"I'm thinking," said the first rancher, "that Cantrell is putting those cows up there just hoping we'll make trouble." All the men agreed.

"I'll speak to Cantrell about it," Hunter told the men.

He walked on into the night, and his mind was still on his skirmish with Jim Olins. It rankled him that he had lost his temper, but he knew that he had done so because there was—however slight it might be—an element of truth in Olins' accusations. He had tried to do a good job in the three months since he had been elected, but the fact remained that Morgan Cantrell was behind his being sheriff.

Cantrell owned the big Rocking M outfit that spread over the desert area west of Rincon to the mountains, and he was also a political power in the county and in the entire Territory. Secretly he had financed Hunter's campaign for sheriff and on the quiet had swung votes his way. Secrecy had been used because the Oscuro ranchers would have bitterly opposed any candidate for sheriff who had Cantrell's open backing. Rumors of Cantrell's help had started soon after the election, but until Olins' outburst tonight, there had been no direct accusation.

UNTIL THREE months ago Hunter had been town marshal, a job that in a small, quiet town like Rincon carried little pay and no prestige. He had taken the job only because it paid more than ranch work, and he knew that now, at thirty-three, time was running out on him. After ten years of riding for other men all over the Territory, he knew at last what he wanted—a small place of his own, perhaps in the San Andres, decently stocked and fenced. That would take money, and so it was money that he was after now.

It had been a surprise when Morgan Cantrell had come to him with the proposal that he run for sheriff, but being sheriff was worth twice as much as being town marshal, and so he had agreed to try it. Because of Cantrell's help and because the incumbent sheriff had not run for re-election, the victory had been easy.

So far Cantrell had made no demands on him. The big rancher had come to him several times with reports of stolen cattle but had made no complaint when Hunter had been unable to turn up any trace of them. There had long been bad blood between Cantrell and the Oscuro ranchers. It was common knowledge that Cantrell wanted to expand, and there was no way for him to move except into the mountains. The Oscuro ranchers were hard pressed, shoe string operators, but they liked what they had, and not a one of them had sold out to Cantrell. So there was friction, and Hunter wondered how long it would be before he would be drawn into their troubles.

He shook his thoughts away now as he came up to Morgan Cantrell's house. It was a big, two story adobe, sheltered by huge cottonwoods and massive against the night sky. Cantrell lived here instead of at his ranch so that he could be in closer touch with local and territorial politics. Hunter knocked on the door, and it was opened a moment later by a woman dressed carefully in a high-throated blue silk dress. She studied Hunter for a moment with cool reserve and then, without any word of greeting, stepped back to admit him into the hall.

"My uncle is waiting for you," she said, and turned to lead him down the hall.

Wes Hunter was aware of a sudden dryness in his mouth as he followed her. This was Valerie Cantrell, Morgan Cantrell's niece, a tall woman in her early twenties with long black hair and eyes that were close to ebony. But it was the supple gracefulness of her walk that had struck Hunter the first time he had seen her, and it was this which he noticed now.

He wanted this woman, had wanted her for a long time now, and her coldness left him puzzled and angry. She had not been this way when he had been marshal of Rincon. Then she had been friendly. They had frequently stopped to talk when they met on the street, and once she had invited him to a church social. Hardly enough to be called a romance, but he had considered it a beginning.

When he ran for sheriff with her uncle's backing, her friendliness had ceased. If they met anywhere now, she was always looking the other way, and the one note he had sent her asking if he might see her had gone unanswered. Hunter was not a man to press himself, and after that he had avoided her, too, but he wondered at her change and someday he meant to find the answer.

Valerie Cantrell stopped now before a paneled oak door, knocked, and turned the knob. "The sheriff is here," she said and left quickly.

The room into which Wes Hunter stepped was big. It was furnished with heavy, leather covered chairs, and a huge black desk in one corner. Morgan Cantrell sat behind that desk; the room seemed designed to fit the bigness of the man. His face was heavy with no looseness of flesh about it. Though he was a man in his late fifties, his hair was still a strong black.

Another man sat in the room, posing stiffly in a leather chair. A tall, thin man, dressed immaculately in a gray pin-strip suit, white shirt, and black silk cravat—Reynolds Pock, county attorney and rising young man in county politics.

Cantrell glanced at the wall clock across the room. "You're late, Sheriff," he said in the tone of a man who is not used to being kept waiting.

Hunter said, "A little trouble in town."

Morgan Cantrell's manner changed instantly, and he waved Hunter into a chair. "That's right, sheriff," he said. "A man's job comes first."

Cantrell took a cigar from a silver humidor on his desk. He offered Hunter one but ignored Reynolds Pock.

"I suppose you're wonderingly why I asked you to come here tonight, Hunter," he said. "Well, I won't keep you guessing. When I see a good man I want him on my side, in my organization. I've watched you. You're ambitious, you know cattle, and you can make friends. I've got a proposition for you, Hunter."

Wes Hunter said carefully, "I'd like to hear it."

"I need a man to represent my interests at the territorial capital," Cantrell said. "I think you can do the job. I know men there who can show the ropes. I'll pay you twice what you're getting as sheriff. And when you get to know your way around up there, I've got a hunch we'll run you for the legislature." Hunter listened unbelievingly. Blood was pounding at his temples. Twice as much as he was getting as sheriff! Twice as fast would he have his ranch. And yet there was something, some nameless thing tugging at his brain, which made him hesitate.

"Why, I don't know," he said.

Cantrell's smile broadened. "It's an open and above board offer, Wes," he said. "I asked Pock over here tonight so he could be a witness to everything that was said."

"But I'm sheriff," Hunter said. "A lot of people voted for me, and I owe them something."

CANTRELL WAVED his cigar in a deprecatory manner. "You'll have to resign, of course. But there are plenty of good men the county commissioners can appoint to finish your term. Being sentimental over a badge won't get you any place."

Still Hunter hesitated. "It's a fine offer," he said. "But I'd like to think about it a little while."

Morgan Cantrell frowned slightly. "I'd want you to leave for the capital right away," he said.

Hunter said, "Sometime tomorrow I'll let you know." And he repeated, "It's a fine offer."

Cantrell relaxed and he was smiling again. "That's fine, Wes," he said. "I guess I try to push things too hard."

At that moment Valerie Cantrell came into the room. She was carrying a silver tray with coffee and a decanter of brandy. Her entrance was timed expertly to bring their talk to an end with a demonstration of good fellowship.

Reynolds Pock, who had sat unmoving and silent throughout the conversation, now rose quickly and crossed the room.

"Let me," he said, and he took the tray from her and set it on the desk. Then he crossed the room again and held the door for her as she went out.

Morgan Cantrell sat stiffly, without speaking, during Pock's actions, but as the door closed behind his niece, he rose from his chair, and the redness of his face took on a purplish cast.

"Pock," he said, his voice trembling with rage, "stop playing up to Valerie. I've seen you doing it before. She's got no time for a two-bit county attorney. She's going to marry a governor or a senator—or better. I'll see to it myself when the time comes."

Reynolds Pock's face went white. "Why, why—" he stammered.

"Listen to me, man," Cantrell said, now with a soft fierceness. "She's the only thing in this rotten world that I don't have a price on. She's the only thing I really give a damn about. If you want to get anywhere in this county, you'll remember what I've said. You'll leave Valerie alone."

Pock's face remained white. He said, "Yes, Mr. Cantrell."

The sight of Cantrell's uncontrollable outburst and Pock's fear was sickening to Hunter. He drank his coffee quickly and left the room ahead of Pock.

He had almost reached the front door when Valerie Cantrell came out of the living room and met him. She handed him his hat and said, "You accepted my uncle's offer?"

Hunter was not surprised that she knew of it. He was only aware of the closeness of her and of the fact that she seemed to be waiting tensely for his answer.

"Why," he said, "not yet."

"But you will, of course," she said and walked back to the living room.

Her words were a statement rather than a question, and they left Hunter faintly angry and again puzzled as he opened the door and walked out into the night.

Sunday was quiet in Rincon, and Wes Hunter spent the morning at his desk in the sheriff's office. He had slept but little the previous night, and in his restlessness he had reached the decision to take Morgan Cantrell's job. He worked slowly and methodically on the papers, and it was almost eleven o'clock when he turned to his letter of resignation.

He wrote carefully, picking his words with difficulty, and when he was only half through he stopped and read over what he had written. He put down his pen and sat there for awhile, looking out the open door, and then he got up and went out onto the street.

He walked for most of an hour thinking a bit. Being a lawman wasn't something sacred to him. He had wanted to do a good job as he always had at any kind of work, but still it was just a way to get the money he needed. He told himself these things and he believed them. He told himself there were plenty of good men that the commissioners could pick to take his place. And yet he did not much want to go back to his office where the letter lay unfinished, and so he walked.

At noon he saw Valerie Cantrell walking home from church, and he watched her from a distance until she turned in to her uncle's house. It had been in his mind for weeks now why Valerie had suddenly turned cold toward him. She knew the difference in their positions and was breaking off a familiarity that might be embarrassing to her later on. Cantrell's reprimanding of Reynolds Pock last night had made it perfectly clear that there was no place in his niece's future for a small-time sheriff or rancher, either.

A man in his place was a fool to love a woman like that, he told himself. And then he thought, *I don't have to stay in this place.* He returned to his office, quickly finished the letter of resignation and put it in his pocket.

But he put off going to Morgan Cantrell's house. The afternoon slipped away and the sun was but a red glow behind the purple scarp of the western mountains when Hunter heard the sound of horses being reined in outside his office. He came to his feet, a premonition in him that there was trouble here.

THE FOUR men who came through the door were all Oscuro ranchers. There were Moss See and Tom Forrest, the two men who had talked to him after his fight with Jim Olins yesterday. There was a man named Bert Longaday whom he barely knew. And there was Jim Olins. They were all grim-faced and there were no words of greeting from them as they ranged themselves in front of the door.

Tom Forrest said, "We've ridden a long way to ask you a question, sheriff. Are you resigning?"

The question caught Wes Hunter unaware. He hesitated, looking at the unsmiling faces before him. He said finally, "Where did you get that notion?"

"Longaday here was in the saloon last night at the same time as Reynolds Pock," Forrest said. "Pock was drunk and talking big. He said something that made Longaday think you were taking a job from Cantrell."

There was no use to hedge now. Tomorrow, when the commissioners met, the thing would be out. Hunter said, "I've had too good an offer to pass up."

Jim Olins jumped forward, his eyes blazing. "Here's your great sheriff," he said to the men around him. "You boys think he's real fine, don't you? How you like being sold out for a few dirty dollars?"

"Slow down, Jim," Moss See said.

"Slow down?" Olins laughed scornfully. "I'm just getting started. I'm not drunk now, and I say he's been Cantrell's man from the day he took office."

Hunter moved toward Olins, but Tom Forrest stepped between the two men.

"That won't get us any place," he said, and then he turned to Hunter and asked, "Sheriff, do you know who's going to take your place?"

"I don't," Hunter said. "It's up to the county commissioners.

Jim Olins laughed harshly, but Forrest silenced him with a frown.

"Hunter," he said, "you know a thing or two about politics in this county. You know that Cantrell has the commissioners in his pocket. They'll rubber stamp any man he tells them to."

Wes Hunter shifted his weight uncomfortably. He knew this, but it was one of the things he had kept out of his mind, telling himself that it was unimportant.

Bert Longaday said, "Maybe you don't know this, sheriff, but the cattlemen around here do. Morgan Cantrell is overstocked—bad. He's got to have more range and right away or he's in trouble. That means mountain grass."

"It figures, Hunter," Moss See said. "Cantrell has got to have a sheriff who will go along with him and take his side in anything he wants to start."

Tom Forrest moved toward the door. "We'll be going, sheriff," he said. "Remember this—if you resign and there's blood spilled around here, it'll be on your head."

The four ranchers were gone then, and the sudden silence of the office grated against Hunter's nerves. They were borrowing trouble, he told himself. Little cattlemen were always jumpy and making everybody else that way. Hunter stood there in the center of the room a long while thinking these things and thinking one other thing—they might be right.

The silence was broken by quick footsteps across the porch, and the office door was jerked open violently. Reynolds Pock stood there, his face a mottled gray, his eyes wild. Hunter had seen fear on men's faces before, and he knew that he was looking at it now.

"What did those ranchers want?" Pock asked jerkily.

Hunter said, "I don't know that it's exactly any of your business, Pock. But they did mention that you did a little talking out of turn in the saloon last night."

The whole side of Pock's face twitched. "You've got to resign," he said. "If you don't and Cantrell hears those men came to you because I—"

Pock's voice trailed off. He put a hand in his pocket and brought out a piece of paper. "I've drawn up a resignation for you," he said eagerly. "All you have to do is sign it."

Wes Hunter reached for his hat. He said, "I can write, Pock. Just now I'm going to have a talk with Cantrell."

"No!" Reynolds Pock's voice came

shrilly. He put himself directly in Hunter's path, and in his other hand appeared a Derringer. "Sign this paper!"

Wes Hunter moved fast, for he knew that this man was hysterical and capable of any action. "Give me the paper," he said.

He reached out and his hand came down hard on the Derringer, knocking it from Pock's grip. It fell to the floor, but did not discharge. Hunter slammed a fist at Pock's jaw, and it landed with a solid thud.

A little sigh went out of Pock and he went limber all over and fell forward. Hunter caught him, eased him to the floor, and then left the office quickly. When a man acted like that, there were some things to find out fast.

Hunter walked down main street, and as he passed the Silver Grill Cafe, which was lighted now against the gathering darkness, something caught the corner of his eye. He stopped and swung around and stared in at the lone man eating at the counter. He was a big man with a sharp-profiled face and hair so blond that it was almost white. He wore a black broadcloth suit, and even while eating he seemed possessed of a kind of casual arrogance.

Hunter stood there, thinking of the one time before that he had seen this man who was called Blond Bill Stiles. It had been in the town of Seven Rivers during the last days of the Seven Rivers' range war. He had seen Stiles kill two men one morning in a street fight and then ride out of town with the same casual arrogance that he now displayed eating his supper.

AND HUNTER knew about Stiles, too. He knew of the other range wars he had mixed into. He knew of the rumor that this man had ridden with the Hole-in-the-Wall gang. He knew that Stiles was hard and tough and cruel and that his gun was for hire.

Why would that kind of man be in a place like Rincon? Hunter asked himself. And the answer came to him as soon as he had asked the question. It left him a little sick so that he walked on stiffly, thinking now of but one thing.

He came to Cantrell's house, and Valerie opened the door almost immediately at his knock. "My uncle is in his office," she said.

Not even the sight of this woman tempered the edge of the anger now rising in Hunter. He walked down the hall and opened the paneled oak door. He did not shut it behind him as he went into the room. Morgan Cantrell rose from his desk, smiling.

"Well, Wes," he said. "You're here with the good news, I hope."

Hunter said flatly, "Who's going to be appointed in my place?"

The smile left Cantrell's face and his mouth opened slightly in surprise, but he recovered quickly. "Why, I don't know, Wes," he said. "It's up to the commissioners, of course, but you can count on them to get a good man."

Hunter said, "A good man like Blond Bill Stiles?"

Morgan Cantrell's body jerked at the mention of Stiles' name, and the look on his face gave Hunter the final knowledge that his hunch had been the right one.

"The job is out," Hunter said. "I don't want any part of a rotten scheme to bring Stiles in here."

The pretense of friendship fell away from Cantrell. "You're a damn fool, Hunter," he said.

"Maybe," Hunter said tightly. "Maybe I am for not seeing why you'd want to back me for sheriff in the first place. You knew you couldn't get a man like Stiles elected. But you knew I wanted money, and you figured you could get me in and then get me out with a big stakes offer. After that you could bring in any kill-crazy gunman you wanted and call him sheriff."

Cold anger showed in Cantrell's face. A blood vessel bulged in his forehead. "I know about you, Hunter," he said. "You've

been a range tramp most of your life. You'd be a ninety a month marshal right now if I hadn't got you in as sheriff. I'm giving you a chance to go places, big places, and I don't like ingratitude in a man."

"I figure I don't owe you a thing," Hunter said. "You told me all you wanted was an honest sheriff. I've been that, and I'll keep on being that. You'll get what you paid for."

Hunter turned and left the room then. He heard Cantrell shout his name, but he did not hesitate as he went down the hall and out the front door. He walked back to town, slowly now with the anger ebbing. He thought of what he had given up—money, a chance to get his ranch quickly, even Valerie, perhaps. But he was still his own man, not Cantrell's, and a man had to live with himself.

He passed the Silver Grill, and he was relaxed now and hungry, and he remembered that he had not eaten since early morning. He went in and ordered steak and potatoes, and he ate slowly with a sense of quiet satisfaction.

When he left the grill he saw the light still on in his office down the street, and he remembered Reynolds Pock. Hunter went there quickly and opened the door carefully, but Pock was not in the office. Instead he saw Valerie Cantrell walking restlessly back and forth in front of his desk.

A tightness hit him in the chest as he looked at her and thought of the only reason he knew why she could be here—to plead her uncle's cause. He said coldly, "You wanted something, Miss Cantrell?"

She looked up quickly and came to him. "Wes," she said, "I had to come to tell you that there will be trouble. That man Stiles came to see my uncle just after you left. I didn't hear what they said, but I know this because I know my uncle—there is danger for you."

Hunter said warily, "You want me to take his job?"

She shook her head. "No, Wes," she said. "That's the one thing I don't want. I thought you were like all the other men I've seen my uncle buy, but I was wrong. I wouldn't change that, not for anything."

And then Wes Hunter understood. He knew why Valerie had turned cold toward him and had refused to see him.

He said, "You thought that I had sold out to your uncle when I let him back me for sheriff."

VALERIE LOWERED her eyes. "Yes," she said. "I've seen it so many times in the past. But it never mattered to me before as it did this time."

Hunter looked at her and now he understood other things that had troubled him. "You don't like to live in your uncle's house," he said. "Why don't you leave?"

"For five years I've wanted to," she told him. "It seems easy, doesn't it? Perhaps it wouldn't if for most of your life you had watched a man have his way with everybody and everything. My uncle loves me in his own way, I suppose, but I've been nothing but one of his possessions ever since my parents died. He has planned my life the way he wants it."

Hunter said, surprised, "You're afraid of Morgan Cantrell, aren't you?"

"Yes," she admitted, "terribly. But not so afraid since I watched you tonight."

He took her in his arms then and kissed her, and she yielded to him completely. They stood there a long while, silent, before she turned to go.

"Please don't," she told him. "I'll be all right. If he saw us together, it would make things worse for both of us."

He saw that she wanted this, and so he remained behind, watching her until she was lost in the darkness of the street. He went to his hotel down the block. He got his key from behind the unoccupied desk and went immediately to his second floor room.

Hunter unlocked the door and left it open while he crossed the room to light the lamp on the dresser. When he turned around to shut the door, he saw the man seated in a corner chair. The man was Blond Bill Stiles. He had a gun in his hand, and it was pointed at Hunter.

"That's right, sheriff," he said. "Shut the door. But walk very slowly and keep your hands out in front of you."

Hunter did as he was told. He knew that this man would kill him instantly if he did not. Strangely, it was anger rather than fear that he felt as he turned to face Stiles.

"Well?" he asked.

Blond Bill Stiles remained in the chair, but there was a tenseness about him as he leaned forward. His gun stayed unwaveringly on Hunter's chest.

"Morgan Cantrell just told me," he said, "that you've decided you don't want to quit being sheriff."

Hunter was careful to stand very still. He said, "Did Cantrell tell you to come here with a gun?"

Stiles' sharp-featured face cracked in a grin that held no humor. "He told me to use my own judgment," the gunman said. "It's the same thing."

"What do you want?" Hunter asked.

"I'll tell you," Stiles said, still leaning forward. "I want that sheriff's job. There are a few places where I'm figured to be not quite respectable. Doing a hitch as sheriff would help things plenty."

Hunter said, "Plus the pay you'll get from Cantrell."

Stiles shrugged indifferently. "Cantrell isn't a piker with money," he said.

"I'm still not resigning," Hunter said flatly.

Blond Bill Stiles sighed faintly and stood up. His gun did not waver for the fraction of a second.

"Well," he said, "let's you and me take a little ride up into the Oscuros. I've got a horse saddled and waiting for you out back. We'll go down the fire escape. If you get more than one step ahead of me, you're a dead man."

He was a dead man anyway as soon as they reached the Oscuros, Hunter knew. There were places up there where a man's body could be hidden forever.

"Lift your gun out with a thumb and finger and put it on the dresser," Stiles said.

Hunter stopped before the dresser. If he had a play it could be made now as well as any time. Slowly he lifted the gun from his holster. When it was level with the dresser top, he swung it against the lamp and dived headlong at the floor.

The crash of glass, the roar of a forty-five, and sudden darkness blended together. A slug thudded into the floor so close that it kicked dust into Hunter's face. Stiles fired again, but Hunter was rolling away, and the shot was wide.

Hunter's gun was settled in his hand now, and he had seen the flash of Stiles' last shot. He fired at that spot, and he heard Stiles scream and fall against the wall. Hunter fired again and yet again, and he knew that there was no faking in the sodden thud that Blond Bill Stiles made as he crumbled to the floor.

HUNTER CRAWLED to the door and opened it. In the pale light of the hall lamp, he bent down to make certain that there was no life in Bill Stiles. Then he walked out of the room and down the stairs. Halfway down he met the pale night clerk.

"Close my room, Harry," he said, "and keep people out. I'll be back soon."

He went to the back of the hotel and found the horses Stiles had talked about. He swung into the saddle and rode directly to the big adobe house of Morgan Cantrell. There was a light in Cantrell's office, and Hunter went into the house without knocking. Cantrell was at his desk, and Hunter's shadow fell across it as he stood in the doorway.

"Hunter!"

"I've just killed Bill Stiles, Cantrell," Hunter said.

Cantrell half rose from his chair, then slumped back down. Fear was strong in his face. "I don't know anything about what Stiles tried to do," he said, his voice so hoarse that it was barely audible. "I'm not mixed up in that in any way."

A bitter smile touched Hunter's lips. "Stop sweating, Cantrell," he said. "I'm not going to kill you."

A trace of color came back into Cantrell's face. "What do you want?" he asked cautiously.

Hunter said, "I want to tell you a few things. I'm bringing charges against you. Maybe they'll stick, maybe they won't. But even if they don't, you're through trying to tamper with the law in this county. You're through trying to fake rustling charges against the Oscuro ranchers. I may not be sheriff long, but while I am, I'll throw plenty of weight. If you get out of line, I'll use it all against you."

Fear was still on Cantrell, but he forced himself to a show of arrogance. "Is that all, Hunter?" he asked.

Wes Hunter half turned and saw that Valerie Cantrell was standing behind him listening.

"That's not all," Hunter said to Cantrell, and then he turned to Valerie. "There's room for you at the hotel tonight. Tomorrow we can find you a place to live. Are you coming with me?"

Valerie Cantrell looked at her uncle, and then she looked at Hunter. She said evenly, "I'm coming with you."

A scream came from Morgan Cantrell. He jerked open a desk drawer and fumbled out a gun, but Hunter was across the room at a single jump. He smashed a forty-five barrel across the big man's forearm, and the gun spilled from his hand and clattered onto the desk top. Cantrell slumped back into his chair, white-faced and shaking.

"I've made up my mind," Valerie Cantrell said to him. "There's nothing you can do to stop me. I'm going."

Hunter looked at Morgan Cantrell, and the man seemed suddenly old and without strength. The hatred and killing anger that had contorted his face ten seconds ago were gone, and now there was only a shocked emptiness. Hunter knew that he was looking at a broken man.

They left the house, Hunter and Valerie, and went down the wide path to the street. Suddenly the muffled explosion of a gun came from inside the house. Valerie stopped and turned quickly, and Hunter knew from the look on her face that she understood what this meant.

"Wait," he said.

He went back to the house and into Morgan Cantrell's study. The big man lay on the floor, dead from a bullet through the heart.

Hunter returned to Valerie. She looked at him, and she bowed her head. "He was an evil man," she said, "but I'm sorry to see it end for him this way."

Hunter said, "I'll take you to the hotel, then I'll come back."

They walked on, not talking, but Hunter was thinking. He was thinking that soon he would tell this woman about his plan for a small ranch, well stocked and well fenced, somewhere in the San Andres. He was sure that she would want to hear about this. ♠ ♠ ♠

CONTRA

Spotted Wolf leaped back, dropping his bow . . .

The scent of stolen whiskey set Webb Donlan roaring on the vengeance trail . . . to a screaming Arapahoe scalping party!

BAND!

By
ART McLEAN

THE smell of burning wood and canvas, mingled with the odor of hot iron, drifted down the coulee. The Wyoming sun beat down and perspiration soaked through Lane Morgan's buckskin shirt. He dropped the reins of his roan and pulled his Spencer carbine from its beaded sheath. He worked his way up the steep side of the coulee and dropped in a patch of buffalo grass to peer down into the valley beyond. Five wagons lay charred on the sunbeaten earth. The burned body of a man lay spread-eagled on one of the wheels. Here and there, scattered about the burned wagons, were broken sacks of grain. A heap of blankets smoldered. The mules or horses had been cut from their harness. Lane shoved back his battered hat and shrank close to the ground as a lone Arapaho quirted his paint pony up out of a hollow. He scanned the earth as he rode slowly toward the wagons. He passed a dead man and looked about the body and then he looked at a man who lay sprawled across a sack of grain. He slid from his mount and drew his knife, walking softly toward the body.

Lane raised his head. The prone man had moved a little. Close by his side was a lance. Lane slid down the slope, keeping in the scant cover of the brush. The Arapaho bent over the man and reached out his left hand for the hair. Lane closed the gap

silently with reversed Spencer. As the knife moved down he swung the butt of the carbine. It thudded on the warrior's head. The buck grunted and went down on one knee. He rolled over and stared up at Lane with incredulous eyes. Suddenly his knife fanged out but Lane sidestepped to avoid a kick but managing to get in a solid smash with the Spencer. The buck went down to stay. Lane rolled the white man over and winced as he saw the naked chest, torn and gashed as though a wild beast had been at it. The man opened his eyes. "They all gone, friend?" he asked in a low voice.

"The Indians? Yes."

"What about the teamsters?"

"All gone."

The man breathed harshly for a moment. "Arapahoes they was. Settin' their horses along the ridge there. We thought they was friendly. They come down and opened fire." He closed his eyes and slowly touched his chest. "Shotgun," he said, "Buck and ball, I think. Big greasy buck painted yellow with white spots. I should be dead. I will be."

Lane opened his canteen and wet the dying man's lips. "What caused it? The Arapahoes aren't on the warpath."

"Whiskey. Howlin' drunk they was." The man opened his eyes. "Tell Sam Orford, at Orford's Crossin' that Webb Donlan didn't get through." The man touched the lance. "This is Lance Striker's weapon. Medicine lance. Take it to Sam. The authorities will know it was Lance Striker. I yanked it from a big buck wearin' a war bonnet. They wouldn't touch me then. Scalped the others; left me alone." The man closed his eyes in death.

Lane got up and looked down at the wagon master and then at the burned wagons. He had seen the smoke an hour before and had ridden three miles off the Lost Creek trail to see what it was. He pulled the Arapahoe's legs from where they lay across the dead man's. The sour stench of whiskey clung about the dead warrior's greasy buckskins. Lane picked up the lance. It was a fine example of Arapaho art. Lane hefted it. It balanced well. He had heard of the fabulous lance of the Arapaho chief, Lance Striker, carried only on the hunt and into war, a sacred medicine lance, supposedly endowed with magical powers. Lane spat. The lance would hang Lance Striker yet.

Lane went back to his horse and turned it toward Orford's Crossing on the Little Warrior. It was the first clue in a month's search. The Indian Bureau had called him in to run down the smugglers of contraband whiskey to the Indians. The Cheyennes had been raising hell. This was the first indication that the Arapahoes too were inflamed with illegal rotgut. Lane looked back at the silent valley. A buzzard wheeled high overhead on ragged wings. Those men had been killed by a white man just as surely as if he had fired the shots himself. It was Lane's job to find him.

Orford's Crossing squatted beside the shallow Little Warrior. Lane reined in his roan. He scratched his jaw and threw the lance into the brush. He had heard of Sam Orford, an Indian trader with a fine reputation, a friend of the Arapahoes. Lane eyed the trading post. The town looked safe enough but Lane pulled his Spencer from its sheath and levered a fifty caliber cartridge into the chamber. He drew rein twenty feet from the main building. The big door swung open and a man stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine. He smiled at Lane. "Howdy, stranger. Get down and have a drink with Sam Orford."

Lane swung down from the roan and dropped the reins. He glanced at the tepees. Orford grinned. "They won't steal your horse, stranger. Friends of mine. Work for me hunting buffalo."

Lane held out his hand. "Lane Morgan," he said, "traveling to Wolf Springs?"

The power in the big man's hand almost made Lane wince. "Wolf Springs? Hunter?"

Lane nodded. Orford glanced at the Spencer. "Stubby gun for hunting, ain't it?"

"I've got a long Sharps at the springs. Been visiting relatives in Dodge, Sam."

Sam led the way into the big common room of the trading post. Lane glanced about. It was well stocked.

Orford swung a hand around. "Need anything?"

"Spencer cartridges."

"Got 'em." Orford lifted an oval keg up on to the counter and filled two tumblers with spirits. "Good Monongahela," he said. "Best in the west."

Lane leaned his carbine against the counter. "Webb Donlan won't get here, Sam."

Orford raised his big head quickly. "He won't? How so?"

"Arapahoes hit his wagons twenty miles from here. Every man jack was killed. Webb was alive when I got there. Wagons burned."

Sam gripped the edge of the counter in anger and stared at Lane. "Webb was the best wagon master in Wyoming. You sure it was Arapahoes?"

"I saw one of them. He was after Webb's scalp."

Orford downed his drink and refilled it. "I been afraid of something like this."

"Why?"

"The Arapahoes been getting whiskey from somewheres."

"So?"

"Lance Striker, he's the local chief, has been trying to find the hombre that's been smuggling it in. Lance Striker hates whiskey."

Lane sipped his drink. "Who's out in those nearby tepees?"

"Rawhide Rattle and his kin. He's all right."

"Has he been out lately?"

Orford rubbed his beak of a nose. "No. He's been sick and his family brought in White Buffalo. He's a medicine man. They been working on Rawhide Rattle for two days. You'd think the damned racket and the things White Buffalo makes him drink would have killed him by now." Orford shook his head. "Poor Webb. Poor boys out there." He looked at Lane. "You'll pass by Fort Dalhart. Pass the word on to the soldiers."

Lane filled his pipe and lit it. "Where is Lance Striker's camp, Sam?"

"Ten miles from here on Lost Creek. I'll have to go see him or get him to come here. We've got to clear up this mess."

Lane puffed at his pipe. "Need any help?"

Orford shook his head. "I can ride into his camp any day without so much as a penknife in my pocket. Tell you what though. I'll pay you twenty a week and found if you'll stay here until things quiet down. You look like a good man with that Spencer. If them broncos get any ideas about hurrahing this place you'd come in handy."

"I can use some money."

"It's a deal then." Sam looked up as a thin man came into the room. "Cap! Webb and the boys got it from the Arapahoes. All dead."

Cap came up to the counter and filled a glass with Monongahela. "I figured something was going to happen."

"This is Lane Morgan, Cap. Morgan, meet Cap Elkins. One of my boys."

Cap gripped Lane's hand. "Pleased," he said.

Lane is going to stay here awhile. Sorta like a guard until things get quiet. You fix up a bunk in the back room for him, Cap."

"Sure think." Cap glanced down at the Spencer. "We can use him, Sam." The thin man shuffled out of the room.

Orford watched Cap as he left. "Cap is a good man," he said. "Not too bright. Got kicked in the head by a mule and gets queer at times but he's loyal and works like a squaw so I keep him on."

Lane walked to the window and looked out at the tepees. "You sure you can trust that bunch?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Sure. Rawhide Rattle's daughter has her eye on me. Long as she likes Sam Orford she'll keep her old man from getting frisky." Sam laughed. "First time my good looks every kept me in the clear with any Indians."

Lane grinned as he came back to the counter. He liked the big man. Sam filled his glass and then put the keg beneath the counter. "Help yourself whenever you have a mind to, Morgan. I got to go out and see Lance Striker tonight. Cap will see that you get vittles."

IT WAS well after midnight when Lane got into his bunk. The dull thumping of a medicine drum came to him, intermingled with the rasping of notched sticks and the thin wail of a bone whistle as White Buffalo worked to drive off the devils of sickness from Rawhide Rattle. A pale moon flooded the trading post. Orford had been gone for hours, riding to the camp of Lance Striker with Finn Gage, one of his employees. Sander Van Horn, another employee, was standing guard in the big common room. Lane had hoped to go with Sam but Sam had not asked him. Lane had almost given the medicine lance to Orford to return to Lance Striker but he had thought better of it. It might be the passport for a meeting with the chief.

It was four in the morning when Sanders Van Horn, a tall, solemn man, awoke Lane. "Time for you to take over, Morgan," he said.

Lane thrust his feet into his boots. "Anything doing?"

"No. Quiet."

Lane swung his gunbelt about him with practiced ease and buckled it, settling it about his hips. Van Horn leaned on his long rifle. "I've seen you somewhere before, Morgan."

"So?"

Van Horn nodded. "I was in the army on that march to Corn Planter's village in the fall of '67. Major Wallace's battalion. Weren't you an army scout then?"

"Yes. But I don't remember you."

"That was eight years ago. I was a private among a lot of other privates. Reason I remember you is when that Arikara raid hit our picket lines one dawn, I was on guard. An Arikara grabbed me by the cartridge belt and was dragging me off when you dropped him with a shot from your rifle. Next thing I knew you were gone after the raiders. Brought back four horses but had a slug in your leg. You were sent back to Fort Cross the next day. I didn't even have a chance to thank you."

Lane eyed the tall man. "I remember the incident," he said, "But it happened so damned fast it was very vague."

Van Horn thrust out a hand. "Well, thanks now."

Lane gripped the proffered hand. "How long you been working for Sam?"

"About a year. I came through here with two wagons heading for Colorado. Lost my teams to horse thieves. Broke an axle when a new team ran away with me. I was dumped out and broke a leg. My wife was killed. Sam took me in, nursed me and gave me a job."

Lane picked up his Spencer. "Sam is quite a man," he said.

Van Horn nodded. "None better."

"Stands in well with everybody, hey?"

"Everybody. The Arapahoes think he's about the best there is. I don't like this business with Webb Donlan." Van Horn sat down on his bunk and pulled off his boots. "Too bad he didn't have time to apologize to Sam."

Lane turned as he reached for the door handle. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, Sam and Webb had a bit of a ruckus before Webb left for Pierce Junction for those supplies. Webb could get nasty when drunk. Left here in a rage."

"What was it about?"

Van Horn held Lane's eyes with his. "Wasn't none of my business, Morgan."

"Sorry."

"It's all right. One thing more. Keep an eye on Cap Elkins. He likes Sam's Monogahela and gets lit up very easy."

"Sam doesn't seem to mind who drinks his whiskey."

"It isn't that. Cap likes squaws. He drinks and then gets ideas. Twice Sam had to get him away from Rawhide Rattle's women. It isn't good business for Sam."

Lane walked into the common room and helped himself to coffee from the pot atop the potbellied stove. He sipped it and then picked up his Spencer. He went outside. The moon was far on the wane. It was quiet. Lane padded up the slope to the brush clump where he had left the lance. As he came back down the slope a furtive figure left the shadows beside the trading post and went inside. Lane came down the hill quickly and thrust the medicine lance under the eaves. He pushed the door open quietly. Cap Elkins stood with his back toward Lane, draining a glass. The keg was on the counter. He started to refill it. "Cap," said Lane quietly.

The thin man turned quickly. His mouth dropped open. "What are you doin'?" he demanded, "Sneakin' up behind me?"

"I'm on guard."

Cap thrust out his weak chin. "Spyin' on me. Just because I sneak a drink."

"Help yourself, Cap. It's Sam's liquor, not mine."

Cap eyed Lane suspiciously as Lane pulled a chair over and straddled it backwards, resting his arms on the back. Cap filled his glass and held it in his dirty hands.

"Well?" he said truculently.

"Drink it."

"You're damned right I will!" Cap tossed down the drink. "I'll drink all I want to."

"Your privilege."

Cap drained another glass and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He lit a battered cigar. The smoke wavered and then flowed out of the window that opened toward the Arikara tepees. He went to the window and looked out. "You like squaws, Morgan?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Enough to leave them alone."

"Hawww! You ain't lived. I knew a Pawnee filly onct who was some pumpkins."

"I'll bet she was," said Lane dryly. She must have been something if she let Cap Elkins get next to her, he thought.

Cap frowned. "You spoiled my story. Well, I got to get to bed." He shuffled from the big room. Lane went to the window. The little man was sneaking silently toward the Arapahoe tepees. Lane left the building and stood in the shadows. Cap wiped his mouth and lay down on the ground near one of the tepees. He reached out a hand to lift the bottom. Lane walked swiftly toward the halfwit. "You jackass," he said quietly, "What the hell are you trying to do?"

Cap spat to one side. "Mind your business," he said.

The sour stench of the little man's clothes sickened Lane. "Get to your bunk and if I catch you around those teepees again I'll hide you good." Lane turned away. He whirled like a cat as he heard the whisper of a blade being drawn from its sheath. Cap grinned evilly as he thrust out the long blade. Lane backed away. Cap stalked him.

"I gutted a teamster once who laid a hand on me," he whispered. He moved in closer.

The rise in his voice warned Lane that Cap was going to strike. The blade swept up for a downthrust. Lane stepped in close, thrusting his right arm under the halfwit's right arm and locking the wrist with his hand. He forced the arm back and placed his left arm across Elkins' chest. He twisted the arm and the blade clattered to the floor. He threw Cap back and the little man kicked out at Lane. Lane gripped his ankle and jerked it up hard. Cap's head hit

the hard-packed earth of the floor with a dull thud and he lay still. Lane picked him up and threw him outside. He snapped the knife blade between two logs and threw the pieces out atop the unconscious little man. He spat and got himself a drink. The venomous halfwit wouldn't forget his humiliation very soon. Lane wished he were through with his stay at Orford's but it seemed the best place for him to get a lead on the contraband.

Sam Orford appeared at dawn. His face was drawn with fatigue as he got down stiffly from his horse. He nodded to Lane as he walked into the big room. He went to the keg and eyed the empty glasses. "Who's been drinking, Lane?" he asked quietly. Finn Gage, a barrel-chested man with a shock of red hair, looked at Lane. "I had a drink, Sam," said Lane.

"I don't mean you. You ain't no tippler, from the looks of you."

"Van Horn, I guess," said Lane.

"He don't drink. It was Cap, wasn't it?"

Lane hesitated. Finn winked at Lane and nodded. "Yes," said Lane.

Sam poured Finn a drink and took one himself. "He go after one of them Arikara doxies?"

Lane filled his pipe. Sam waited. "Well?" he asked, "You goin' to answer me or not?"

"All right. He did."

Sam's face seemed to tighten. "Wait here, Finn," he said. He walked quickly from the room. Lane looked at Finn. The redhead had walked to a window looking toward the shack where Cap bunked. "Come listen," he said with delight. "This is always good."

Lane stood behind Finn. Sam took a whip from where it hung over a rail and kicked open the door of Cap's shack. In a moment the snap of the whip came to the waiting men. Cap shrieked again and again as the whip lashed about him. Lane turned away as Finn leaned out the window.

"Listen to it," he said. "This is the best one yet."

Lane went to the big door. Finn turned. "Where you goin'?" he asked.

"I wouldn't beat a damned mule like that, Finn," said Lane.

The redhead crossed the room and gripped Lane's arm hard. "Listen, Morgan! Don't you cross Sam. Cap has this comin'. He'd ruin Sam if he got away with triflin' with them squaws."

Lane stepped outside, shaking off Finn's grip. Cap had appeared out of the shack. He looked both ways in bewilderment as Sam came out of the door behind him and lifted him a foot off the ground with a vicious kick. As Cap landed on all fours he was booted again. He got up only to be kicked all the way to the corral.

Sam turned and walked to the common room. He stopped and looked at Lane. His face was a mask of rage, white and taut. "Didn't you have enough sense to stop him, you damned fool?"

Lane shifted a little. "Just a minute," he said quietly. "I don't like your talk, Orford."

Orford raised his whip and Lane gripped his wrist hard. "Hit me with that whip and I'll break your arm," he said. He looked at Finn who had shifted a little to get behind him. "Stay where you are, Gage."

Sam tried to force his arm down but Lane tightened his grip on the wristbones in a peculiar hold he had learned from a Kiowa buck. Sam looked away. "All right," he said. Lane let go and Sam walked into the common room and filled three glasses. "Have a drink, Morgan. I'm tired and damned worried. I apologize."

Lane nodded. "All right, Sam."

Sam sat down and sipped his drink. "There's hell to pay out on Lost Creek," he said quietly, "No wonder I'm upset. Lance Striker is sore as a bear. His medicine lance is gone. He won't go nowhere until it's found. Whoever has it can name

his price around Lance Striker. The chief won't leave his lodge and meanwhile his broncos are raising hell. Spotted Wolf has tried to take over and by the looks of things he might yet. He's always wanted to be chief and the broncos back him up."

"Spotted Wolf?" asked Lane.

"Yeah. A big buck. Wears yellow paint with white spots."

"Quite a warrior, eh?"

Finn downed his drink. "Wears a war bonnet," he said, "With almost as many *coups* as Lance Striker hisself."

Lane thought back to Webb Donlan's dyin words. *"Shotgun,"* he had said, *"Buck and ball, I think. Big greasy buck painted yellow with white spots. I should be dead. I will be."*

Sam felt for a cigar. "I palavered most of the night with the chief. He's worried sick someone else will get that lance. If Spotted Wolf gets it, Lance Striker won't have to worry anymore. He'll be gone like last year's snow."

The rattle of hooves and the quick snap of a whip came to them. Lane went to the front door. A light wagon bounced across the ruts of the road and drew to a halt with a shriek of dry axles. A man dropped from the wagon seat and looked back up the slope.

"You seen any Arapahoes around?" he asked Lane.

"Here and there. There are some camped near the crick."

"I don't mean them." The man turned and scratched in his beard. "I mean broncos. I hear tell there's been a massacre not far from here." His little eyes shifted from Lane's steady gaze. He probed in his flattened nose. "By God," he said, "I ain't peddlin' no more around here 'til things quiet. Sam in?"

"Yes." Lane watched the man walk into the trading post. He walked quickly to the back of the wagon and lifted the tilt. The wagon was full of trade goods. He stepped back looking for a false bottom. The bed inside was higher than it should be. He thumped the side of the wagon with his fist. It sounded hollowly. He went into the post. Sam looked up.

"This is Zeke Schmitz, Morgan. Peddler."

Zeke nodded. "Who's he?" he asked, jerking his head toward Lane.

"Employee," said Sam.

Zeke sat down. "Business so good you can hire another man, Sam? You wasn't doing so well last year."

"I'm doing all right."

"You should be. Crowdin' out everybody else."

Finn explored a front tooth with a finger nail. "Now, Zeke," he said, "You ain't the businessman Sam is."

Sam looked at Lane. "Take a ride around, Morgan. See if you can spot any broncos."

Lane got his roan and was saddling it when Sanders Van Horn appeared. "Where are you going, Lane?" he asked tersely.

"Scouting for Sam. Zeke Schmitz says there are broncos around."

Van Horn came close. "Watch your back, Morgan," he said.

Lane tightened his girth. "Why?" He looked at the solemn ex-soldier. "Cap laying for me?"

"Him? No."

"Who then?"

"I'm not saying. I like you, Morgan. I wish you'd pull out of here before trouble starts."

"What do you mean?"

Van Horn walked away. "Whenever Zeke Schmitz shows up there is trouble."

"Is he running whiskey?"

Van Horn turned quickly. "For God's sake, don't say anything like that around here! Keep your mouth shut." He hurried off to the stables.

Lane spent most of the morning probing the coulees and draws a few miles from the post. He led Ponca into a draw as he saw

a short file of Indians riding to the north with travois behind their horses. He watched them and then recognized one of the squaws of Rawhide Rattle. He swung up on Ponca and drew his Spencer, spurring the roan toward the Arapahoes. They halted as they saw him and waited until he drew close. Lane held up his right hand in the sign of peace and looked curiously at the squaws. Their faces were blackened and their clothes were rent. One of them sat her pony with bowed head. Her fingers were bound in bloody rags. A young brave spoke to Lane. "What do you want?"

Lane glanced at a bundle across a travois. The body of a man. "One has gone?" he asked in Arapahoe.

"Yes. Rawhide Rattle has gone to the House Of Spirits."

Lane nodded. The squaw had cut off the first joints of her fingers in mourning. "Where are you going, brother?"

The young brave pointed north. "To the camp of Lance Striker." He looked back over his shoulder and then at a young woman who was eyeing Lane with interest. "It is not good back there."

"What do you mean?"

The Arapaho was silent. Lane handed him a twist of tobacco. The brave touched the Lancaster musket lying across his naked thighs. "There is a white-eye who follows us. The little man who is not well in the head."

"Cap Elkins?"

"Yes. He will not leave Running Bird alone."

From the looks of the young Arapahoe woman Lane deduced she would not be adverse to advances from any white man. Yet the brave would not touch Cap. The weak in mind were considered as the favored of the gods. "I'll speak to him, brother," he said quietly. "I will pray for Rawhide Rattle."

The brave nodded and touched his pony with his quirt. Lane watched their slow progress to the north and then rode toward the Little Warrior. The rifle boomed hollowly from a draw as he rode up a rise. The smoke drifted off before the wind. Lane hit the ground, jerking his Spencer free and slapping the roan on its rump. The rifle crashed again and the slug whined eerily from the hard earth. Lane rolled down into the draw and ran swiftly for two hundred yards. He poked his head through a clump of brush. Cap Elkins lay behind a bank of earth, cuddled up to his rifle, looking toward where Lane had been. Below him in a hollow, was a saddle horse and a packmule with a heavily laden aparejo on its back.

Lane levered home a cartridge and sighted on the mule. He fired. The mule buck-jumped and hit the ground. As Cap turned, Lane fired again. The slug kicked up dust into the horse's face. The horse reared and dashed off down the slope. Cap cursed and fired. Lane hit the ground as the slug cut twigs to the left of his head. He fired and grinned as Cap cursed and rolled down the far side of the bank. In a moment Lane saw him legging it after his horse.

Lane whistled for Ponca and the roan trotted up. Lane rode down toward the mule. The reek of whiskey came to him. He dismounted and opened the aparejo. Half a dozen bottles of rotgut were smashed. Lane smashed the rest of them with the butt of his Spencer and mounted to trail the little man. He lost sight of him in a maze of cut-up land and finally turned the roan toward the trading post.

Lane was puzzled as he rode toward the post. Elkins didn't have the brains to carry on illegal whiskey trading with the Arapahoes. They would avoid him because of his lecherous attitude toward their squaws. Yet he would be safe enough with them because of his mental condition. Where had he gotten the liquor? Did Zeke Schmitz have whiskey in his false bottomed wagon? Lane spurred the roan on toward Orford's Crossing.

The post was quiet. Sam Orford and

Finn Gage were asleep. Sanders Van Horn was in the trading room.

"Where's Zeke?" asked Lane.

"Trailing Cap Elkins."

"What happened?"

Van Horn shrugged. "Blessed if I know. Cap vanished and half an hour later Zeke was after him."

Lane went outside. Zeke's wagon was in the stable. Lane opened the back of the tilt and moved some of the trade goods aside. He lifted a hinged trap door. He felt about in the bottom. The hollow was empty. There was no indication that anything had been unloaded in the stable. He went back to the big log building. Van Horn was asleep in a chair. Lane poked about in back of the counter but had no success. The floor was beaten hard as marble, with no indication of an opening. He looked in the back rooms but saw nothing but trade goods. He still had his ace in the hole—the lance. With it he could go to the camp of Lance Striker. "Find anything?" Van Horn asked quietly in the common room.

"What do you mean?"

Van Horn stood up. "What were you looking for?"

"Spencer cartridges."

Van Horn reached up a long arm and took a box from the shelf behind him. "Why didn't you ask me, Morgan?"

Lane took the cartridges.

"What is your reason for being here?"

"You know I came through there on my way to Wolf Springs, Sanders. Why do you ask?"

The man's gray eyes held Lane's. "You're up to something, Morgan. Do you mind if I advise you?"

"About what?"

"Get out of this country before you get shot in the back."

Lane grinned. "Thanks. I think I can take care of myself."

Van Horn tilted back his chair. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Lane went to the door.

He didn't dare ask Van Horn any questions. He had to play a lone game, for a time at least. He looked in the window. Van Horn was asleep again. Lane reached up and took the lance. He led Ponca into the shelter of the trees and mounted him. He headed north toward the camp of Lance Striker.

The Arapahoe camp sprawled along the creek. Lane sheathed his carbine and touched Ponca with his spurs. He rode down the slope in the dying sunlight, holding the medicine lance up high. A young brave stared at him and ran swiftly to a lodge which stood apart from the main camp. A dozen other lodges clustered about it. The brave called into the big lodge. A burly warrior stepped out. The sun shone on his paint; yellow with white spots—Spotted Wolf, the killer of Webb Donlan and the would-be usurper of Lance Striker's position as chief. He watched Lane steadily as a cluster of braves formed about him. One of them handed the warrior a cap-and-ball pistol with a bow and a quiver of arrows.

Lane kept his eye on Spotted Wolf as he rode into the camp. Suddenly Spotted Wolf strode toward Lane, stringing his bow. He notched a murderous looking arrow and stopped in front of Lane. "Where do you go, stranger?" he asked in Arapaho.

Lane glanced about the Arapahoes who came running to ring him in. Their eyes were on the medicine lance. "I want to see Lance Striker, your chief," he said quietly.

Spotted Wolf scowled. "Give me the lance, white-eyes."

"It is the chief's."

Spotted Wolf came closer. He had the depraved look of a killer. "Give me the lance." Behind him crowded the warriors who had been with him near his lodge. Lane looked across the heads to a big lodge near the creek. "It is for Lance Striker."

Spotted Wolf drew back his bow string and raised the bow. The steel tip was five feet from Lane's chest. "Give me the lance!"

Lance eyed the Arapaho. His face showed the signs of heavy drinking. His hands shook a little. Suddenly Lane thrust the lance at the bronco. Spotted Wolf leaped back, dropping his bow. The arrow shot between the legs of an old man. Before he could be stopped, Lane spurred his roan toward the chief's lodge. A shout went up from the people. The door flap of the lodge swept back. A tall warrior stepped out. He had the look of an eagle. A single feather was fastened in his hair.

He looked at Lane. "That is my lance, White-eyes. Where did you get it?"

Lane handed the lance to the chief. "Seven white men died some days ago. Near Lost Creek. They were murdered by Arapahoes. I found this lance there."

"Do you accuse me of killing them? I? Lance Striker? I am the friend of the white man. The lance was stolen."

Lane looked back at the people. Spotted Wolf and his men were scowling at Lane. Lane swung down from his roan.

"It is back again now, Lance Striker."

The chief nodded. Suddenly he placed a hand on Lane's shoulder. "You are welcome in my village, white-eyes. How are you called?"

"Lane Morgan."

A voice was raised behind them. It was Spotted Wolf. "The lance is powerless!" he shouted. "It has been contaminated by the white man!"

Lance Striker rose to his full height and looked at Spotted Wolf.

"Who are you to speak? You, who drinks the firewater of the white-eyes? This man is our friend. He has done nothing to spoil the medicine of the lance."

"What do the people think, Lance Striker? There are those who will follow me. I speak for many of them." Slowly the people began to part. Many of them came to stand by Lance Striker. Others crowded beside Spotted Wolf. Lance Striker pulled back his robe. He touched the wound scars on his chest which had been outlined by ochre.

"I bear these wounds from honorable battle, Spotted Wolf! None of them are from the bullets or knives of the white man. I am the chief. The lance is mine. Do you challenge me for the right?"

Spotted Wolf suddenly pulled an arrow, butted aside a warrior with his shoulder, and drew back the bow string. Lane shouted. Lance Striker hefted the lance and hurled it just as Spotted Wolf loosed the shaft. Lane leaped to shove the chief aside. Something thudded into the back of his left shoulder. The last thing he saw as he reeled to the ground, was the face of Spotted Wolf. The medicine lance hung from the Arapahoe's left eye. He fell dead as Lane sank into unconsciousness.

Lane opened his eyes in Lance Striker's lodge. Voices came to him. It was dark except for the glow of fire embers. He was alone. His shoulder was bandaged. His gear and saddle lay beside him. Someone was talking in English outside of the lodge. "The skunk is in there, Zeke." It was the whining voice of Cap Elkins. "I *swear* he stole the likker."

"Lance Striker thinks I'm a friend of his. Let's go in there. If you're lyin', you damned weasel, I'll cut you to ribbons!"

Feet grated on the hard earth. Lane gripped the butt of his Colt and pulled it beneath the buffalo robe. He cocked it as two dark figures came into the tepee. One of them stirred up the fire. The light revealed the faces of Cap Elkins and Zeke Schmitz. Cap crouched by Lane and gripped his hair, jerking his head up viciously. Lane opened his eyes. Cap spat full into his face.

"Yahhh! Makin' a damned hero outa yourself, you swine! You got somethin' comin' to you and it ain't no medal."

Zeke gripped Cap by the shoulder and

tumbled him backward. He drew a knife and tested the edge of it with his thumb. "You, Morgan! Where's that likker you took from my waggin?"

Lane shifted a little. "Ask Cap."

Lane looked at the little halfwit. "He stole it and was bringing it here when he shot at me. I killed his mule and he beat it."

Cap tried to get at Lane but Zeke threw him back. "He's a liar, Zeke! A trouble-maker!"

Zeke knelt by Lane. His sour breath sickened Lane. "Look. I got to get that likker. If I don't, I'm in one helluva jam."

"Lanse Striker doesn't want liquor around here, Zefle. You'll get cut to pieces if he finds out."

Zeke shook his head. "He's making big medicine with his lance in White Buffalo's lodge. He won't be around. Now! Where's that liquor?"

He held the knife against Lane's throat. Lane gripped his Colt tighter. Suddenly the tent flap swept back. A man ducked into the lodge. Lane felt his senses go limp with relief as he saw the big frame of Sam Orford. Sam held his Colt in his hand.

"Get back, Zeke! You too, Cap!"

The two men raised their hands and backed away. Sam looked down at Lane. "Why didn't you show me that lance, Morgan? It would have saved a lot of trouble."

"What do you mean?"

Sam rubbed his jaw. "Spotted Wolf would have become chief and business would have been damned good."

A cold chill crept over Lane. "What are you talking about, Sam?"

Sam eyed Lane. "With that lance I would have had my man in as chief here."

"You run in the whiskey?"

Sam nodded. "Zeke brings it in from the east for me. I supplied it to Spotted Wolf. I talked him into stealing the lance and the idiot left it when he raided Webb Donlan's wagon train. I sent a warrior back for it. I guess you took care of him."

Lane nodded. "Who set the Arapahoes on Dolan?"

Sam grinned. "Why me, of course. Dolan knew too damned much and threatened to go to the authorities if I didn't quit running in liquor. I figured I'd better get rid of him." He eyed Lane. "Where's that liquor, Morgan?"

Lane glanced at Cap. "Ask him, Sam."

Cap cringed as the big man turned toward him. "You!"

"He stole it from Zeke's wagon after you beat hell out of him. I guess he figured he'd cut quite a show in this camp with an aparejo fill of red-eye," said Lane.

He moved his Colt a little. Sam crossed toward Cap. The little man jerked out his knife and slashed at the side of the tepee. Sam reached out a big hand. Cap whirled like a cornered rat. The blade flicked out and caught Sam.

Cap yelled in excitement as the big man went down. He bent over him. Zeke shoved Cap aside and the blade flashed across his face. Zeke fell into the fire, screaming as blood poured between his hands clasped over his gashed face. Cap raised his knife high over Sam Orford. Lane fired. Cap grunted and turned. He dived at Lane but the Colt rapped three times.

"Thanks, Morgan," he said and closed his eyes. The tepee flap was pulled back. Lance Striker looked down at the two dead men and the writhing Zeke.

Lane looked up at the chief. "There are the three men who saw to it that Spotted Wolf and his warriors got firewater."

Lance Striker looked down at Sam. "He was my friend."

"Sam Orford seemed to be everybody's friend," Lane said dryly. He watched the two warriors drag the shrieking Zeke from the tepee. A minute later there was a louder shriek and then silence. Lane looked at Sam, dead beside the despised halfwit. A pretty picture to carry away with him! ♠ ♠ ♠

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

Miles Warren tracked
the Arizona badlands to search
out the murdering idol of the Sioux
. . . and the Promised Land—of the Dead!

. . . this was something uncanny . . . something seemingly dangerous about the Sioux night riders . . .

The Death Dealers

THE FAINT noise carried down the icy wind that howled over the Dakotas. Miles Warren lifted the flaps of his fur hat and bent his head to listen. The hills were bathed in cold moonlight and there was no sign of life. Miles stood up in his stirrups and looked to the north. There was a movement on a far slope. A dark serpentine line seemed to move sluggishly down the ridge. Miles kneed his gray so that he could study it closer.

Suddenly he slid from his saddle and led the gray into a deep brushy hollow. He pulled his Spencer carbine from its boot and plodded back to the lip of the draw, a lean lath of a man, bulky in his buffalo coat. He settled on the crusted snow. A chill settled on him—not from the cold or snow. It was what he saw coming toward him. A line of figures, clad in long shirts or robes, white in the light of the moon. They were thin and emaciated. Even the ponies they rode were gaunt. The braided hair and the few feathers Miles saw identified them as Indians.

"Sioux," he said softly to himself. "Or their ghosts."

Miles lay still, watching the ghostly horsemen pass the hollow. Although a tinge of superstitious fear still touched his mind he knew the silent horsemen were real.

The unshod hoofs squeaked on the crusty snow and behind the long line of men appeared women, riding horses which dragged travois. Even the swarm of dogs following the last of the riders carried its small packs.

The Sioux had been at peace for many years but this was something uncanny, something seemingly dangerous about the night riders who were passing from his sight into a grove of willows down the valley. A wolf howled mournfully across the hills as though in salute to the eerie riders and then the only sound was the moaning of the cold wind.

Miles went back to Tecumseh, his big gray, and rooted in a saddlebag until he found a bottle. He raised it to his lips and drank deeply to drive the chill from his bones and his mind. He wiped his mouth and hooked an arm about his saddlehorn, looking off in the direction in which the Sioux had gone.

He replaced the bottle and led Tecumseh out of the hollow, swinging up in the saddle to ride north-east toward the ranch of his old army partner, Al Dwyre, on Little Deer Creek. It was not until he had topped the ridge down which the Sioux had come that his sixth sense, developed through twelve years of scouting against Indians, warned him that he was not alone in the cold wastes. He cocked his carbine and dismounted to scout ahead on foot.

He pushed his way into a thicket. Something moved to one side. There was a crash in the thicket and a body smashed against Miles. He staggered sideways, raising his carbine to fire and then thought better of it. He reversed it and swung at the dim figure before him. His opponent darted to one side into a cleared area.

He was a warrior, dressed in a long white muslin shirt, and wielding a long-bladed knife. Miles rushed in, catching the Sioux on the left arm with the butt of the Spencer. His foot slipped on the crusted snow and he fell to one knee. The warrior closed in. Miles drove upward, catching the warrior in his lean gut, propelling him up and backward. The Indian grunted in surprise and slashed with his knife.

Miles clamped a big hand on the knife wrist and jolted home a right cross that snapped the warrior's head back. Then Miles twisted the knife from the buck's right hand and drove in a left jab that sent the Sioux backward to hit the ground. His moccasined feet flew up with the impact and as he rolled to get up again Miles clipped him alongside the jaw with his right foot. The buck lay still.

Miles wiped the sweat from his face and picked up his carbine. The moon shone clearly on the unconscious Indian's face. He looked vaguely familiar. Miles leaned against a tree and waited until the warrior opened his eyes. His dirty muslin shirt was ripped and spotted with blood from his bleeding mouth.

"Why did you attack me, brother?" asked Miles in halting Sioux. It had been a long time since he had spoken the language of the Dakotahs.

There was a faint flick of surprise in the young warrior's eyes.

"I think I know you," he said quietly.

Miles looked at him closely.

"You are Black Fox, the son of Strikes-the-bear! The Oglala. Do you not know me? The good friend of your father?"

Black Fox got slowly to his feet and gingerly touched his jaw.

"My father is dead," he said.

Miles looked at him quickly.

"Dead? How did this happen?"

"The Indians in blue clothes, those you whites call police, came to Standing Rock to arrest Sitting Bull. My father was with them, wearing blue clothes. There was a fight and Sitting Bull was shot and killed. My father was shot by a Ghost Dancer."

Miles scratched his jaw and looked at the bedraggled muslin shirt.

"Ghost Dancer? I don't understand."

Black Fox raised a hand. A mystic look appeared on his lean face.

"Kicking Bear from the Cheyenne River Reservation brought the great word to my people. Kicking Bear went to the place the white men call Nevada to talk to the great Pai-Ute, the new Messiah, Kwo-hit-sauq, or Big Rumbling Belly. The man who will give the Indian back his rightful place in the world."

Miles listened closely. His skill at Sioux was coming back to him but the words of the young man meant nothing as yet.

"Tell me about it, Black Fox."

"Big Rumbling Belly has been to heaven and has talked with the Great Spirit and was commanded to preach a new gospel. Kicking Bear listened to his words and went to the Land Of The Dead. He saw many of those who had died in the wars with the white men. Old friends and relatives. Big Rumbling Belly sent Kicking Bear back with red and white paint which will ward off sickness, renew youth."

MILES STUDIED the young Oglala. It was obvious Black Fox believed

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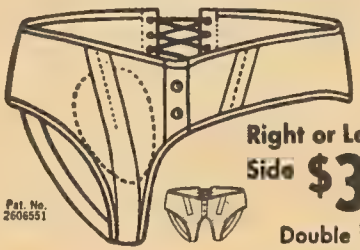

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thoroughly in what he had said. There was a fanatical light in his eyes. Black Fox held up his hands toward the night sky.

"The day of the white man will soon be over. The whites will be destroyed by a great landslide that will cover the world with new earth. Upon this new earth will roam the buffalo and deer as of old. Those of us who obey the Messiah will be lifted up above this great landslide and will be dropped gently back again to meet our beloved dead who will live with us as of long ago."

"When will all this happen, Black Fox?"

"When the grass is knee high this coming spring."

Miles eyed the long white shirt.

"And the shirt? Why do you wear it?"

Black Fox drew himself up and slapped his chest.

"KickingBear has told us that no white man's bullet can pierce our ghost shirts! This we believe!"

Miles jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"And where are they going?"

Black Fox smiled.

"To join those of our people in the Bad Lands! They are led by Big Foot, who is our leader since the death of Sitting Bull."

Miles placed his Spencer against a tree and felt for his pipe. He filled it and then looked up at the young Oglala.

"A Ghost Dancer killed your father and you are still one of them?"

Black Fox spat.

"He was one of the police! He did not believe! He said I was no longer his son! That I was a fool to believe in this madness and that no good would come of it!"

Miles lit his pipe. Strikes-the-bear had been a scout for the army at one time. He had looked forward, far beyond most of his people, to see that it was a white man's world and that the best thing for the Dakotahs to do was to make friends with their conquerors. Suddenly Black Fox threw himself sideways, crashing through the brush to run like a startled deer across the snow-covered ground.

Miles made no effort to stop him. A few minutes later he heard the tattoo of unshod hoofs on the frozen earth. For a long time he stood there, puffing on his pipe, looking to the south where he had seen the fleeing band of Ghost Dancers. He shrugged. He had come back in time to work at his trade again—that of army scout. He shook his head. He had had enough. Let someone else run these deluded red men to earth. He had a ranch to start.

Miles rode all that night, bucking against the cold wind, hunched in his great buffalo coat. But there was an inner coldness in him that the buffalo coat and the whiskey could not dispel. It was as though the sight he had seen under the light of the cold moon had stayed to haunt him. He was not basically a superstitious man, but he had been around Indians too long, he admitted to himself. Some of their superstition must have rubbed off on him. Time and time again he would turn in his saddle to look back, although the Ghost Dancers must have been many miles away on their way to the Bad Lands.

Miles topped a rise overlooking Little Deer Creek just as the sun tinged the eastern sky. He was cold and hungry and he hoped Al wasn't away from his place. The sprawling log house was just as it had been five years before when he had helped Al erect it. A horse whinnied from the peeled pole corral as Miles spurred the tired gray down the slope. He swung down from the gray in front of the big house and hammered on the door. Feet grated against the floor inside and he heard the tapping of a cane.

"Who is it?" a familiar voice called.

Miles grinned. "Miles Warren, you damned old mossback!"

"You're a damned liar!"

"Open the door and see."

The door swung open and Miles moved forward to grip the chunky man in front of him about the shoulders. Al Dwyre shook his head.

"You damned old buzzard! Many's the time I've thought of you and wished I was riding with you again." His face broke out into a broad grin. "I figured you'd be back before now, what with Geronimo taken care of." He pulled Miles inside the log house.

Miles punched his old partner's shoulder.

"You know me. I had to wait until the last shot was fired. How's the ranching business? I'm ready to start."

Al's face sobered.

"Take care of your horse. I'll tell you when you get back. I'll have breakfast ready."

"Over their breakfast Al told Miles his story.

"I don't know whether or not the Indians down in the Southwest have been affected by this Messiah craze, but they sure as hell have up here. The Sioux, Cheyennes, Arapahoes, Shoshones, Bannocks, Utes, Kiowas, and other tribes are affected with it."

"I had a little experience with it on the way up here." He told Al of what had happened.

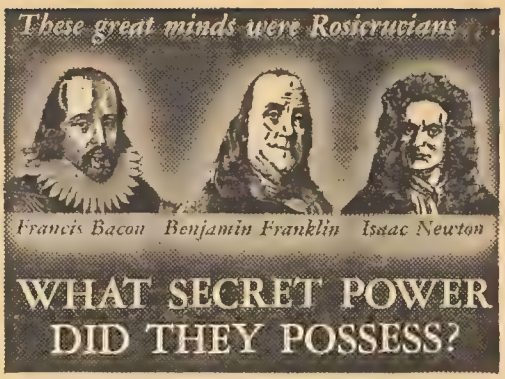
Al shifted his game leg and rolled a cigarette. "Then you do know something about it. Miles, I'm afraid we've only seen the beginning of something that will lead to a lot of bloodshed."

Miles filled his pipe.

"Just a scare, Al."

AL GOT up and limped to the fireplace to throw some wood on the fire. He turned to face Miles.

"You don't know the full story, Miles. The Sioux are desperate. Their cattle are dying. The buffalo are gone. Government supplies have not been issued up to



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the contracts agreed upon. Their reservations have been cut down to a minimum. Twenty-five thousand Sioux are living on the poorest land, in what was once their country, while the white men live off the fat of the land. This Messiah has the answer for them: a land of promise where the Sioux will live as before and where the white man will not exist."

Miles puffed on his pipe.

"This thing is fantastic, Al. It is almost as though a mastermind was guiding them to their own destruction."

Al came close to Miles.

"Listen, Miles! This Messiah, once called Wovoka, or the Cutter, is no fool—an uneducated Pai-Ute in Nevada. A sickly ranch hand now has the Indian population of the west in the grip of as fanatical a fever as I've ever seen. Miles, they believe him. He tells them that if they kill a buffalo they have only to leave the hoofs, tail and head on the prairie and the buffalo will spring up whole the instant they turn their backs. This new earth that is to bury the white man is supposed to be five times the height of a man, covered with sweet grass, and with herds of buffalo and ponies. The Pacific Ocean is to be filled up; the other oceans to be barricaded. Sitting Bull was the leader of the local Ghost Dancers. His death has not stopped the movement at all. Big Foot now leads the followers of Sitting Bull."

Miles eyed his old partner. Al had always been a friend of the Indian, and paradoxically, had been one of the finest scouts for Crook in his Rosebud campaign.

"You seem pretty hot about the whole thing, Al. The Sioux gave you that game leg at Dead Canyon. Why are you so concerned about them?"

Al flipped his cigarette into the fire.

"I don't really know. Remember Strikes-the-bear? He was as much my friend as you are. He once told me the only way for his people to get along with ours was to follow their ways. He was right."

"Strikes-the-bear is dead, Al."

"Yes. He was doing what he thought was right."

Miles emptied his coffee cup.

"His son, Black Fox, didn't think so."

Al nodded.

"The young warriors follow the lead of the old ones who still dream of the old, free days. It is a tragedy, Miles. I'm only sorry for my sister, Ellen, is on the way out here now to stay with me."

"That kid?" Miles grinned. "I remember the letters she used to write to me after you sent her my picture."

Al looked at Miles quickly.

"Kid? You have been away a long time!" He opened a drawer in a battered roll-top desk and took out a tintype. He gave it to Miles. Miles whistled. A pair of wide eyes gazed at him from the picture. Gone were the pigtails and the precocious look. She was like Al and yet unlike him. Miles felt something stir in him he had never known before.

Al glanced at the picture.

"She was sixteen when you went away, Miles. She's twenty-one now."

A cold, disquieting fear took possession of Miles.

"Where is she?" he asked as he tamped down the tobacco in his pipe.

Al waved a hand.

"George Norris was bringing her up from the rail junction at Edina."

Miles looked at Al. "Edina? That's damned close to the route of Big Foot's band."

"What are you driving at?"

Miles stood up.

"Can you ride, Al?"

Al shook his head.

"This leg has been letting me down."

"I'll be on my way toward Edina then."

Their eyes met. Al moved forward.

"You don't think. . . ."

"I'm not thinking anything."

Hoofs hammered on the frozen earth across the creek. Al hobbled to the door

and threw it open. A lone horseman drew up a black.

"Al!" he shouted, "I was jumped near Flat Butte! Sioux! Some of them damned Ghost Dancers! They got your sister!"

Miles ran forward. Al had paled. He looked at Miles.

"Then you were right! Do you think they'll do anything to her?"

Miles shook his head, but there was dislief in Al's eyes.

"Remember those two girls at Benson's Station in '78, Miles?"

Miles remembered all right. How could he forget? A war party of Sioux and Cheyennes had swept through the little station, driving off the stock, killing the men, having their bloody way with the two pretty Benson girls. It was etched on his memory in letters of fire. He picked up his Spencer and shrugged into his buffalo coat. Al yanked his old army coat from a peg but Miles clamped a big hand on his wrist.

"I'll go," he said quietly. His eyes met Al's.

"You can't go alone," he said.

George Norris went to a cupboard and took out a bottle. He drank deeply and his hands shook.

"Gawd, what a sight," he said thickly. " 'Bout twenty of 'em, wearing them poor crazy white shirts and looking like they ain't done nothing in weeks but fast and dance. Thin they were, like sticks."

Miles cut his hand sideways at the shaken man.

"Where are the nearest troops, Norris?"

"There should be some at the Pine Ridge Agency, twenty miles from here."

"Get a fresh horse and be on your way!"

Norris nodded and ran outside to strip the saddle from his blown roan. Miles looked at Al.

"Where is Flat Butte?"

"Follow the creek north toward the Bad

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Lands. You can't miss it." Al gripped Miles by the arm. "What can I do, Miles? I just can't sit here."

"You have a buckboard?"

"Yes."

"Hitch it up. Round up as many of your neighbors as you can get. Send them after me."

Al nodded as he put on his coat and picked up a Henry rifle.

"Do you think there's much chance, Miles?"

Miles looked away.

"They may have taken her as a hostage. They've been quiet for years. She may be safe enough as long as no fighting starts."

He went outside and threw his saddle on a clean-limbed buckskin. He swung up on the horse and touched it with his spurs, riding to the north. It was still cold but the sun had driven off the icy chill of the night before. Miles was tired but he knew he could not rest as long as the girl was in the hands of the fanatical Ghost Dancers.

Miles found the trail close beneath the somber bulk of Flat Butte. Mixed in the snow were the tracks of shod and unshod horses. The rest of the horses had been ridden north and one of them was also shod. That would be the trail of Ellen's horse. There was no sign of life as Miles rode slowly to the north, toward the Bad Lands, watching the trail closely for some sign of Ellen's fate.

MILES RESTED the buckskin late that afternoon in a motte of cottonwoods, making a fire of dry twigs to heat his coffee. The tracks he had been following all that day still were plainly visible, almost as though the Ghost Dancers defied anyone to follow them. Miles was puzzled. It was not like the Sioux to be so careless.

That night Miles kept on, easily following the trail on the crisp snow. Suddenly the trail began to widen. The marks of unshod hoofs joining those of the party he was following began to show frequently. Several hours before dawn, with the Bad Lands thirty miles ahead, the size of the party seemed to have increased to at least a hundred riders. The marks of travois showed.

Miles topped a ridge, leading the buckskin, before he saw the movement in the valley below him. He slid back down the ridge and dropped the reins of his horse. He jerked his Spencer free and plodded up the ridge again. Below him were the conical shapes of tepees, many of them, with a pony herd beyond beside an ice-locked creek. A low chant carried to Miles above the steady thump of feet on the hard earth.

Miles worked his way down the slope into a clump of low willows. Dancers circled about a large cleared area. They were ghostly white in their long muslin shirts. Without music, accompanied only by low chanting, they advanced and retreated, with linked hands, bowing and straightening. The pale moonlight glistened on the thin shirts, giving the Sioux the look of gaunt phantoms. Moccasined feet slapped an eerie, insistent tattoo on the earth. Miles jumped a little as a high-pitched wail rose from the watchers. Shrieks began to punctuate the chanting.

The dancers bent low to scrape dust from the cleared space. They poured it on their heads, straightened and whirled madly, faster and faster, wilder and wilder. Dancers began to go down in exhaustion. The feet of the other dancers slapped against those who had gone down. Suddenly the chant stopped and the dancers dropped to the ground. They seemed to be expecting something. A warrior walked slowly into the center of the cleared area and held up his hand. His face was thin and his body gaunt beneath the thin muslin shirt.

"My brothers," he said slowly, "I bring to you the promise of a day in which there

will be no white man to lay his hand on the bridle of the Indian's horse; when the red man of the prairie will rule the world, and not be turned from the hunting grounds by any man. I bring you word from your fathers, the ghosts, that they are now marching to join you. I have seen the wonders of the spirit land, and have talked with the ghosts. I traveled far, and am sent back with a message to tell you to make ready for the return of the ghosts in the spring."

Miles faded back into the brush and skirted the camp. Even the guards who usually watched the pony herd were standing at the outskirts of the crowd of Sioux, listening to the words of the prophet. Miles cached his Spencer in a hollow tree and drew his Smith and Wesson .44. He bent into a crouch and ran silently behind a high pile of firewood between two tepees.

The prophet was still talking to his spellbound audience. If Ellen was there she must be in one of the tepees. Suddenly he dropped behind the firewood. A brave had appeared farther down the line of tepees. He walked slowly forward, obviously trying to hear the words of the speaker. Miles backed away from the firewood and passed behind the line of tepees. The warrior had stopped and was standing between two lines of tepees watching the speaker. Miles went behind the tepee where he had first seen the brave. He placed his ear close to it and listened. Something moved inside.

"Ellen! Ellen Dwyre!"

There was a faint movement within the tepee. Miles scratched the surface of the lodge.

"Ellen! It's Miles Warren!"

"Miles? Where is my brother?" The faint voice carried to Miles.

"Are you alone?" asked Miles. He glanced past the tepee. The warrior had moved closer to the crowd.

"Yes."

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Miles nodded in satisfaction and skirted the tepee. The door slit had been left open. Miles ducked low and crawled in. Furs and skins were scattered about the floor. Moonlight showed through the opened smoke flap at the top of the lodge. There was a movement at the side of the tepee. Miles crouched down beside a pile of furs. Ellen Dwyre looked up at him with wide eyes.

"I'm tied, Miles," she said. Miles tore back the furs and rolled the girl over, taking a sheath knife from where it lay beside the fireplace. He cut the bonds and pulled the girl to her feet. For a moment she rested her head against his chest.

"We have little time," he said quickly. "Can you walk?"

"Yes! Yes!"

Miles went to the door and looked out toward the crowd. They were still listening to the prophet but the guard was not in sight. Miles reasoned he had forgotten about his charge. He went to the back of the lodge and slit the covering with his knife, helping Ellen through. She clung to his arm. Miles guided her behind the pile of firewood and turned to look back toward the Sioux. Something slapped against the hard earth. A lithe figure closed in on him, wielding a knife.

The guard!

Miles raised his left arm. The blade raked against the thick sleeve of the buffalo coat. He swung his heavy-barreled revolver, the barrel cracking the Sioux above the ear. As he went down he whooped tremulously. Miles ran to the girl.

"Into the trees," he said.

He turned to meet the onrush of the warrior he had felled. The knife tinkled on the hard earth as he twisted the brave's wrist. They closed just as three more warriors rounded the lodge, their moccasined feet slapping the ground. Miles jolted a left to the warrior's gut, doubling him over, and then brought in a right uppercut that sent him crashing back hard against one of the oncoming bucks.

"Run!" he shouted at Ellen. "My horse! Down the ridge!"

He kicked a warrior in the belly and doubled over as one leaped on his back. He flipped his attacker to the ground and booted him on the jaw. Another Sioux closed in, waving a billet of firewood. Miles took the blow on his shoulder and wrist-locked the arm, bending it back as he brought up a knee into the groin. The Sioux gasped and went down. Miles turned on a heel to right jab another warrior. Another brave leaped on his back and Miles fell to one knee. He came up fighting into the middle of a circle of shrieking braves. Two more of them went down before his heavy blows and then something thudded at the back of his neck, driving him forward to stagger helplessly under the club of a big brave. His face smashed against the earth and he knew no more.

MILES OPENED his eyes. It was dawn and he lay in a tepee, bound hand and foot. A buffalo robe was over him. His neck and head ached. He moved a little and grunted involuntarily as a stab of pain shot through his head. Feet scraped on the earth. He turned his head slowly to see Ellen Dwyre kneeling beside him. "Didn't you make it after all?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"It was no use. I'm sorry. You put up such a courageous fight to help me."

He glanced at the tepee door.

"Where are they?"

"Most of them are sleeping after last night's dance. Some of them have gone out. On a scout I think. Soldiers have been seen. A few. Scouts, I imagine." She stood up. "There is food here. They have not been unkind to me."

Miles shifted a little.

"I was a fool not to wait for the soldiers."

She smiled and touched his face.

"It would be like you to come alone," she said.

Miles studied her. Gone was the gangling teen-ager he last remembered. She was a lady now. Clear gray eyes and smooth skin; poised and mature.

"Maybe I'm getting too old to play the hero," he said.

She shook her head.

"No." Then suddenly she stood up. "Why did you come?" she asked quickly.

Miles looked up at her.

"Perhaps because of your brother. Probably because I have been in Arizona too long and have seen what happens to white women in the hands of outlaw Indians."

Her eyes held his.

"That was the only reason?"

Miles hesitated. Some of the letters she had written to him years ago came back to him. The letters of a hero-worshipping school kid. She should have been long over that school-girl crush. Yet he remembered how he had felt when he had seen the tintype shown to him by Al at the ranch.

"No," he said slowly. "I wanted to see you again. To save you."

She knelt beside him again and placed her head against his shoulder.

"Maybe you think I am shameless but I wanted to know. If anything happens now I am not afraid."

"Nothing will happen."

"I have heard them talking. I remember some of the Sioux talk Al taught me. They are desperate. They really believe this crazed prophet."

Miles looked at her soft brown hair.

"Al always wrote to me about you," she said quietly. "Where you were. What you were doing. I read the papers to see how the Apache campaign was coming out. I was always afraid I'd see your name listed amongst the dead. When Geronimo surrendered I was so happy I ran away from school to come home, hoping you'd

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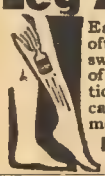

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be here at last, but Al was furious. He sent me back. Then I learned you had stayed on to finish the job and I hated you for it. Then I realized you could not possibly know how I felt and I went back to reading Al's letters about you. I came home this time to spend Christmas with my brother, never realizing you too, might have come home."

Miles shook his head. This was a mess. It was bad enough that a white woman was in the hands of the fanatical Ghost Dancers. Now, knowing how she felt, and realizing he too felt the same way toward her, the situation had taken on far more importance.

Feet scraped on the frozen earth. A Sioux, wearing the feathers of a chief, came into the tepee. He was wrapped in a thick blanket and his face was drawn and flushed with fever. His hand shook a little as he adjusted the blanket.

"Do you speak the language of the Dakotahs?" he asked.

"Yes," said Miles. The chief was very ill. He sat down, resting against a woven back rest.

"I am Big Foot," he said slowly. "I am the chief since the death of Sitting Bull at the hands of our own people who wear blue clothes."

"You are very ill, Big Foot," said Miles.

Big Foot waved a hand.

"It is more than a sickness of the body, white man. I am sick for my people. They are very foolish."

A ray of hope came to Miles.

"Why do you not return to the reservation?"

"I am willing, but my young men are not. We have already treated with some of the soldiers. I was ready to stop this foolishness but my young men would not listen. We escaped from the soldiers during the night and came here."

"Where are you going?"

"To the Bad Lands. Many of my people are already there."

"This is madness Big Foot. The soldiers are too many for you. Some of your own people are now Indian Police. They too, will fight against you to keep the peace. Go back to the reservation. Let us go."

Big Foot drew his blanket up higher.

"I did not want to take this white squaw. Black Fox and some of the young men took her. The white men will treat with us, they said, if we have a white woman here."

"Tell him he must let us go."

Big Foot shook his head.

"I am chief in name only. They say they will kill both of you if I let you go."

"You are the chief. Talk to the older men. Make them see the right trail."

For a moment the tired eyes of the Sioux studied Miles.

"The right trail? You cannot blame the young men. You whites have not kept your word with us. You have taken away our hunting lands and tried to make farmers of us. Yet you do not give us enough land for farming and grazing. We were to be given seed, cattle and tools. Few of them have we seen. Sometimes we must ride ninety miles for rations. Beef is given to us in such quantities and at such times that we either have feast or famine." The chief's voice rose and broke. He shook a fist and then sat back, panting heavily in his anger.

Big Foot stood up. "I will stay with my people," he said. "If they die, I die also. But I do not wish that for you." He took Miles' long-barreled Smith and Wesson from under his blanket and placed it beside Miles. "Keep this. Protect yourself. We ride soon. I will try to help you get away." The chief stalked from the lodge.

FOR FOUR days Miles and Ellen rode with the band of Sioux. The Sioux were too busy trying to evade pursuing troops to bother much with their two white captives; yet there was no chance for them to escape. There were always guards close

to them, day and night, and Black Fox and his close friends never let Miles and Ellen out of their sight. Food was running out and the ponies were getting thin. Moccasins were cut by the crusted snow. Many of the Sioux were sick. Miles guessed it was pneumonia. Christmas came and went. Three days later, as the band plodded against an icy wind, there was some excitement among them. Miles looked up. A warrior was riding hard toward the band, turning his horse in tight circles. Miles looked up at Ellen, perched on a paint pony.

"Enemy in sight," he said. "Troops. I have been wondering how long this flight would go on."

"What will happen now? Will they surrender?"

"Look." He pointed at the young men. Blankets were being stripped off and tied about waists. The warriors wore only breech-clouts and leggings, despite the cold. Winchester repeaters were flourished and shaken four times at the cold gray sky in supplication to the gods. The warriors deployed and rode in the direction from which the scout had come. The band stopped on a ridge, looking down in a great shallow valley. Miles saw a column of blue-clad troops on the far side of the valley, in sharp contrast to the snowy earth. Guidons, half red and half white, snapped in the cold wind.

"Four troops," said Miles to Ellen. "Some Indian Scouts." He leaned forward. "By Heaven! Light artillery! I've heard of it! Hotchkiss guns!"

Ellen drew her coat up about her neck. "Surely the Sioux won't fight."

Miles eyed the guards who stood near them. Older men, thin and wasted from their fasting and recent lack of food. He slipped his hand inside his buffalo coat and gripped the butt of his revolver. The Sioux had scattered across the snowy earth. Suddenly an officer rode out from the col-

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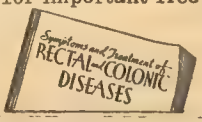

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umn on the far side of the valley and held up a hand. Big Foot, still wrapped in his blanket, was driven forward in a light wagon. He had been too weak to ride. Miles looked hopefully at Ellen.

"It looks like a palaver. The Sioux don't seem too anxious to buck up against the cavalry."

Three Sioux braves suddenly lashed their horses from near the wagon and rode up the ridge. One of them was Black Fox. His face was inflamed with rage. He rode up to Miles. His Winchester was across his brown thighs, the muzzle pointing at Miles. One of his companions brought up Miles' horse.

"Get on," said the young warrior to Miles.

Miles looked up at the young fanatic.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked.

Black Fox waved a hand.

"I am not ready to give you up to the soldiers, even if Big Foot has become a woman, treating with them."

Miles shifted a little. His hand was still on the butt of his revolver. He could draw and shoot, probably getting Black Fox and one or two of his companions at least, but the shooting might precipitate a battle, and conditions were touchy enough as it was.

"Why do you not release us, Black Fox? Let us have peace instead of war. Your people are cold and tired, hungry and ill. If anything happens to the white squaw or to me you will be hung by the soldiers."

Black Fox shook his head.

"Yellow Bear has told me to get you away from here until we can use you to treat with the white men. You will come and the white squaw too."

"Yellow Bear?"

"He is a prophet. He has shaken the hand of the Messiah and can call the spirit in his sleep. He has done so. The spirit appeared in a vision and told him that all was not lost with us. Yellow Bear told me to get you from the band and away from the soldiers."

Miles shrugged and swung up on his buckskin. He looked at Ellen.

"We'll have to go," he said. "Wait for a chance. Don't be afraid."

She was pale but she nodded.

"I'm not afraid as long as you are with me."

From a distant ridge Miles looked back to see the band of Big Foot riding with the column of troopers. Black Fox spat as he saw the movement.

"Big Foot is a woman," he said. "We will go to meet Yellow Bear. We are not through with this yet."

It was a cold clear night when the three Sioux halted Miles and Ellen on the edge of a shallow valley. Miles could see an ice-locked creek winding its way through the valley. It must be Wounded Knee Creek; he could think of no others in that vicinity. Tepees showed in the clean moonlight and beyond them moved the pony herd. On a slope, near a road, were the troops, some of them asleep in their shelter tents, others patrolling the area. Black Fox left the group and rode toward the Sioux camp. Miles kneed his horse close to Ellen. Something hard pressed against his back. Miles looked back across his shoulder. The expressionless face of one of the young bucks looked at him.

It was close to dawn when Miles and Ellen were forced down the slope into the Sioux camp. In the tepee into which they were ordered were Black Fox and Yellow Bear. Miles eyed the crafty face of the so-called prophet with misgiving. It was pock-marked and evil. Yellow Bear spoke slowly.

"The troops are looking for this white man and the white squaw, Black Fox. They are stupid. They looked among us and did not see them so they did not know I had ordered you to keep them away until we made camp here at Wounded Knee. Big Foot is very sick. The white medicine

man has been here to work his spells but Big Foot has no power left to command us."

"What do you intend to do with us, Yellow Bear?" asked Miles.

"I will take command of the band tomorrow, white man. I have spoken to the spirit in a vision. He has told me our ghost shirts will turn back the bullets of the soldiers. He will guide our bullets into the bodies of the soldiers. But first I will treat with the soldiers. I will tell them we will hold you as hostages until they go away."

"And then?"

"We will have time to wait until the miracle happens next spring; when the great landslide will wipe you whites off the face of the earth and make this a land of the red man again."

"This is madness!"

Yellow Bear stood up and walked close to Miles.

"You will see!"

"And if the soldiers will not go away tomorrow?"

Yellow Bear spat to one side. "You and the squaw will die before they do."

"You haven't a chance."

Yellow Bear pulled back the tepee door flap. He jerked a thumb at Miles.

"Get outside. I will show you what chance we have!"

MILES STEPPED out into the clear cold moonlight. Braves were unloading boxes from wagons. Others were opening the thumb screws. Here and there were warriors prying open other, smaller boxes. Miles felt an icy chill creep over his body. The longer boxes held new Winchester repeaters. The smaller boxes held cartons of cartridges. But what chilled Miles far more was the sight of squaws waddling up to the wagons and each taking a new repeater and several cartons of cartridges

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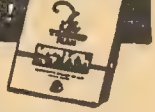

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which they stowed beneath their blankets. Yellow Bear gripped Miles by the shoulder and shoved him forward. He slapped a hand against a Winchester.

"There are seven shots in these shoot-without-loading guns. The soldiers can shoot but one shot at a time! We will cut them to pieces while they try to reload!"

Miles shook his head.

"How many warriors do you have, Yellow Bear?"

"One hundred and twenty."

"And how many soldiers are there?"

"It is said there are five hundred of them."

"With the wagon guns. You will be wiped out, Yellow Bear."

Yellow Bear's hand lashed out, cracking against Miles' left cheek.

"Unbeliever! You will see!"

Later Miles and Ellen sat close together beneath a buffalo robe in the tepee where they had been ordered.

"There will be bloodshed tomorrow," said Miles quietly. She touched his face with her hands.

"I am not afraid." He bent to kiss her and held her close. Tears wet his face as she wept. She pressed close to him and her body shook a little until at last she fell asleep. Later Miles gently disengaged her arms from about his neck and covered her fully with the robe. He paced back and forth in the tepee.

Gradually it grew light. The camp began to stir into life. Squaws began to pack travois and wagons. Miles looked out of the door toward the troops. They too were astir. Blue smoke rose from cooking fires. Horses were being led up from picket lines. A trumpet stuttered into life and rang across the cold valley of the Wounded Knee. The little Hotchkiss guns stood on a knoll to the northeast. Soon troops rode to form a cordon around the camp of the Sioux.

There was a sharp clanging of metal as the breeches of the Hotchkiss guns were opened, loaded and closed. Miles looked about the camp. Three warriors stood near his tepee, their arms beneath their blankets, but Miles knew there were new Winchesters beneath the covering. There was a tension in the air as several officers led a party of enlisted men toward the Sioux camp. Warriors squatted in front of their lodges, watching the advancing party with glowering eyes. Here and there troopers pulled sitting squaws up from the frozen earth. They held up the new Winchesters they found. Slowly the search party advanced toward the center of the camp, collecting a few rifles and some cartridges. Miles gripped Ellen by the arm.

"I will try a break for it as soon as they are close enough. You must stay close to me. If shooting starts you must throw yourself on the ground." He bent and kissed her.

"I doubt it. They are generally very careful in calculating risks. They are outnumbered almost five to one. It would be madness to start a fight now."

Suddenly Yellow Bear, shrouded in his blanket, stood up, throwing it aside. He spoke rapidly, haranguing his warriors.

"Our bullets will carry true!" he shouted in Sioux, slapping his ghost shirt. "Their bullets are powerless against our shirts! Let us fight for our new world."

Miles drew his Smith and Wesson and cocked it. He watched Black Fox. The fanatical son of Strikes-the-bear sat with three other warriors, watching Yellow Bear. Suddenly at a spoken word from Black Fox the four Sioux threw aside their blankets, raised shining new Winchesters crackled into life all over the camp as squaws pulled repeaters from beneath their blankets and handed them to their men. The singleshot 45/70 Springfields answered the fire as officers roared out the command to fire. A trooper went down with a bullet-smashed jaw. Troopers in among the tepees tried to rally. A captain, a regimental-sergeant-major and a trooper went

down between two lodges as they ran to join their mates. Powder smoke swirled between the tepees. Guns flashed and slugs whipped through the lodges or thudded into flesh. Big Foot, staggering in his weakness, went down in the middle of a battling group of whites and Sioux. Knives flashed in the rising sun. A knot of Sioux fought their way through the blue-clad cordon of troops, cutting a bloody path with their Winchesters.

Miles gripped Ellen by the arm and pushed her through the tepee door. One of the guards turned, raising his repeater. Miles shot him through the chest and caught the other guard across the side of the head with the heavy barrel of the revolver. He shoved Ellen between two tepees and turned to meet a rush of three warriors. His shot dropped the first warrior. The second fell over the fallen Sioux. The third whirled about as Miles shot.

"Run!" he shouted at the girl. "Make for the troopers!"

By now the Sioux had emptied the seven-shot magazines of the Winchesters, cutting a swath of destruction in the ranks of the cavalrymen. Cold brown fingers crammed cartridges into magazines as the single-shot Springfields still cracked steadily. Warriors went down before the accurate fire, blood staining their white ghost shirts. Agonized shrieks went up as the Sioux realized that Yellow Bear's promise that the shirts were bullet-proof was not true. The warriors opened up again, hitting many of their own squaws and children.

The Hotchkiss guns began to cough, exploding shells among the tepees. A tepee caught fire and the fresh wind spread it to other lodges. Miles backed away from the tepees. Ellen was running up a slope. A burly warrior rose up out of a gully and fired at her. His shot went wild. Miles dropped him with a shot through the head. Two squaws closed in on Ellen, shrieking

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with frustrated rage, brandishing butcher knives.

Miles closed on them, dropping one with a hard swing of his pistol and shoving the other so that she staggered into the gully. Lead sleeted across the camp. The Hotchkiss guns stopped firing, slued about and opened up on the Sioux trying to reach the pony herd. Miles pointed toward a ravine.

"Run, Ellen!"

He snatched up a Winchester from the ground in time to fire twice, dropping a buck who ran in at him swinging a clubbed rifle. Miles shrugged out of his heavy buffalo coat and worked his way up the slope, covering Ellen's retreat. Troopers and Sioux fought all over the frozen earth, clawing and kicking, fighting with fist and boot when guns ran dry.

MILES PLUNGED down the slope after Ellen. A wedge of firing warriors drove back a line of attacking soldiers two hundred yards from where Ellen was running. Miles shouted at her but she did not hear him. A warrior saw her and shouted. Half a dozen bucks followed him. Ellen was in the way of their escape. Miles looked to the right. A knot of artillerymen were unlimbering a Hotchkiss gun at the mouth of the ravine. The warriors opened on it.

Ellen hit the ground as lead whined over her. An officer at the gun went down. Two cannoneers carried him from the field. Miles ran his Winchester dry, dropping two warriors, as they rushed the gun. The one man at the gun fired. He snatched up another shell and a slug knocked it from his hands. Miles plunged down the slope. He fired his last two shots from the Smith and Wesson and then crashed into the yelling warriors, whirling his Winchester about his head. The artilleryman held his fire as Ellen ran to the mouth of the ravine. Miles broke from the fight and rolled into a depression. The Hotchkiss spat three times and the warriors dropped back, allowing Miles to get to the gun. The gunner, a corporal, grinned at him.

Miles shoved Ellen into a brushy hollow and turned to help the gunner. The stubby little gun fired and sent a shell shrieking into a knot of Sioux trying to lash their horses out of the ravine. One of them was Black Fox. Miles snatched up the gunner's Springfield carbine and and cocked it. He swung it up, steadied it, sighting it on the fanatic's brown back. He squeezed off. The carbine bucked back and Black Fox threw up his arms and fell backward.

"Good shooting," said the corporal as he opened the breech of the Hotchkiss, "Let's try it with this baby."

The fight ended five hours later. Miles took Ellen to the knoll where the remainder of the Hotchkiss guns were in battery, firing at distant groups of Sioux. They looked down on the camp. Many bodies were scattered on the frozen earth, Sioux and soldiers alike. Miles looked at a guidon. It was that of the Seventh Cavalry. An officer limped up the knoll and looked out over the battlefield.

"The public will never believe that the Seventh didn't do this out of revenge for the Little Big Horn," he said quietly. "Yet the Sioux started it. They killed many of their own women and children with those repeaters."

"It was so hopeless," Ellen said. "Why did they do it?"

"It was a dream. A dream that they would once again be a powerful people in the land they had once known. The dream is over. They face reality again. They must rebuild their lives. Those that are left." He drew her close. "And now I must get you back to your brother."

She looked up at him.

"And what about you?"

He grinned.

"I think I'll go along—that is if you don't mind." ♠ ♠ ♠

(Continued from page 63)

action. This man had committed murder, all right, but his crime was only a drop in the bucket beside the many flagrant atrocities being committed by Red Waschick and the men directly under him.

The prisoner, half drunk on liquor he'd bribed out of the jailor, showed little concern over his plight. "They ain't gonna hang me," he confided to Ollie with a thick tongue. "I got my friends." He put a dirty forefinger beside his nose and screwed his face up in an elaborate wink. "You jes' watch. You stick aroun' at four thirty an' see if I ain't got friends—" The man hiccupped and grinned loosely.

Ollie finished shaving the man. Outside, he felt a tension in the air, as if from an approaching thunder storm. The prisoner's words turned over in his mind. "You stick aroun' at four thirty an' see if I ain't got friends—"

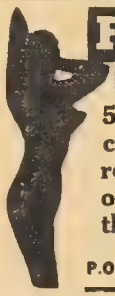
Was Red Waschick and his band riding into town to free the man from jail?

Ollie went around to some of his merchant friends, passing on to them the words of the half drunk prisoner. They all then took the information to government Marshal Masterson.

"Good," he said. "That's just what I want. Red Waschick will show his hand and it all will be out in the open. I'll need a posse."

Ollie returned to his barber shop. Four soldiers from the post were waiting for hair cuts and shaves. By the time he'd finished it was nearly four o'clock. He cleaned up, walked out of the shop and locked the door. He wished he didn't have to leave this town. In his whole life it was the only place that had been home to him. The best part of him would stay back here.

Then the voice of fear inside him said, *Hurry up, you sentimental fool. Death is coming in on the six o'clock stage from El Paso. Hurry and run while you still have*



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time. There's less than two hours, now. . . .

A body of horsemen came riding down the street, stirring the yellow dust under their hoofs pushing through the thick tension in the air.

THEY tied up at hitch rails along the street and strode insolently up the board walks, shouldering other men out of their way. Ollie Towns stood there, looking at them, and he saw one was little more than a boy, a youngster of seventeen who was walking beside Red Waschick, with his thumbs hooked in his belt and a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He was swaggering and trying to imitate the walk of Red Waschick, but his face was more than a little pale and he was swallowing too often.

"Frank Jenkins," Ollie murmured aloud. The widow Jenkins' oldest boy! Then he called, "Frank! Hey, Frank!"

There was no plan in his mind when he called the boy, only a desperate necessity. Death was waiting out in that street for Red Waschick and his men. There was going to be open gun play in a few minutes. Bat Masterson was a fearless man, but he was also a killer, even though he was on the side of the law, and he would meet Red Waschick in only one way—with both guns blazing.

The Jenkins boy came over to where Ollie stood.

"Say, now, I'm glad to see you, Frank. I was just thinkin' it's about time you started shavin'." Frowning, he examined the youngster's face with a critical, professional air, and ran a finger over the smooth cheeks. "Aha!" he grunted. "Just like I thought. You got a strong beginnin' stubble, boy."

Frank's eyes widened and blinked at him. He lifted his hands to his jaws. "Honest, Mr. Towns?" he asked, his voice cracking a little.

"It's long been a custom of mine," Ollie continued, to give a customer his first shave on the house." He unlocked the door of his shop. "Come in here, boy. Got somethin' to show you."

Frank Jenkins looked around, at the men he had ridden with, then at Ollie Towns. "Golly, I don't know, Mr. Towns. I'm supposed to stick with my friends—"

"Oh, come on, boy." Ollie swore. "Won't take more'n a few minutes. You got no business walking around the streets with a beard like that!"

Struck in the most vital spot of a young man's vanity, Frank settled himself in the barber chair. "She's really beginning to show, huh, Mr. Towns?"

"Something terrible," Ollie assured him, furiously whipping up a lather in a white cup. "How come you haven't been in to see me sooner?"

"Well, I—you know how it is; a man get's busy. . . ."

"Sure," Ollie said. He held the plain white cup in front of Frank's eyes. "See this? Besides givin' my customers their first shave free, I furnish them a personal mug to go up on that shelf, there with their name on it."

Frank's eyes grew larger. "Honest?" He started to reach out and touch the cup, but Ollie drew it back.

"Providin'," Ollie scowled at him suspiciously, "they become my customers."

Frank Jenkins assured him fervently that he would patronize no other barber shop, and Ollie promised to have the sign painter put Frank's name on it the first thing next week. "In green letters, I think," Frank Jenkins said, "with them little curlycues like the others got."

TOWNS plopped generous blobs of thick lather on the boy's face and began scraping at the non-existent beard.

"Heard a sad story today, Frank," Ollie related as he shaved. "About a guy I know. This feller got off on the wrong

foot when he was just a younger, not much older than you, I reckon." Ollie's eyes traveled distantly into the past. "He got in with an owlhoot crowd and spent his whole life runnin' and hiding. Never could settle down with a family or stay anywhere long enough to make friends. He made enemies, though. Plenty of them. He killed more'n one man to stay alive. Then there came a time when he got sick of runnin' and hidin' and killin'. He wanted to settle down in a town where folks would respect him and be his friends. All his life, people had either feared him or hated him; he'd never had any real friends.

"Sad part about it, though, he couldn't settle down. He had to keep on the move all the time, because once back there, he'd made the wrong kind of enemy. You ever hear of Ben Scobee, son?"

"Golly," Frank's voice came out of a mound of steaming towels. "I'll say. He was the toughest man in Arizona. Nobody could outdraw him."

"That's the one," Ollie went on. "Well, this feller, this guy I knew, once shot Ben Scobee in the back and took him in to the law for the bounty he could get out of it. It wasn't such a decent thing to do, even if it looked all right to the law. Ben lived over that gun shot, but he spent the next three years in jail. When he got out he began tracking this feller to kill him and to this day that man has to keep runnin', runnin'. Can't ever call a place his home or—"

Ollie's narration was interrupted by a sudden explosion of gunshots and men's cries out in the street. Frank bounded out out of the chair, but Ollie grabbed him around the waist, tripped him and they both sprawled headlong on the floor. The moment they did, the front window showered broken glass over them. Bullets thudded and splintered wood around them.

"Stay down huggin' the floor," Ollie whispered. "It'll be over quick. That's

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Bat Masterson Red's been tangling with."

"Bat Master—" Frank Jenkins looked at the barber with a pale face.

Ollie was right. In five minutes it was over. Red Waschick and five of his boys were dead. The rest of them were standing in a meek circle with their hands up while the posse covered them; and Bat Masterson walked around relieving them of their hardware.

The barber and the frightened boy walked out on the sidewalk. Just off the sidewalk, in the rutted street, lay Red Waschick with half his face shot away. His one remaining eye stared at the sky. Frank Jenkins took one look at him and stumbled to the edge of the walk and threw up.

Ollie took out his watch. It was four forty five. The Mexican trader, Gusman, had left by now. The stage from El Paso was just an hour and fifteen minutes away.

Ollie Towns sat alone in his little barber shop. The excitement had gone from the streets. The dead men were at the undertakers, the live outlaws were in jail, and talk about the event had been carried to the livery stable and the saloons. Ollie sat alone.

He took out his watch and laid it on the shelf where he could see it. He could still leave. He could get a horse and ride out alone, taking his chance with the Indians. He thought about that as he looked at the row of shaving mugs gleaming softly in the gathering dusk.

He didn't come to any conscious decision about it. He just knew that he would stay here and take his chance, no matter how slim. There had to come an end to a man's running one day. He took a heavy old .45 Colt out of a drawer and laid it beside the watch. It had been many years since he'd used the gun.

He sat there while the shadows gathered. At last, he saw a man walking slowly, warily down the street toward his shop. He knew that the six o'clock stage from El Paso was in. ♠ ♠ ♠

DEATH BE MY JUDGE

(Continued from page 18)

though it had been mauled by a rake, quit cold, letting his gun go and sagging down beside Ern.

Gib stared at Linc's face. "Brent, what in the devil's name were you hitting them with?"

"My fists. Backed by these," Brent said. He opened his hands and a couple of hickory beer bungs, picked up at that stand of empty barrels, dropped to the walk. As effective as brass knuckles, that device, but still something no ordinary man would dare to pit against guns. But Brent was no ordinary man!

Brent chuckled and said, "It wasn't as crazy as it seemed; I was fairly certain the two big ones would claim the right to try for me first, and that if I could move fast enough, chop them down, take on the other two and keep them all from using their guns, I could take them. If Sig would have gotten up, though, or if Ern would have made good that shot he tried, I might have been wrong. You shifted the odds just enough to make everything come out right. Thanks, dad!" He held his hand out toward his father.

Gib grunted, feeling an odd, pleasant sort of embarrassment. He turned to face the crowd coming at a run—men from the dance, stopping to stare in awe at the mementoes of a fight that would be talked about for a long time to come.

The real meaning of what had happened here, he thought, mustn't be lost to these gaping onlookers.

He raised his voice to hold every man's attention and to underline the meaning of the situation.

"Take a good look!" Gib said. "Four dogs as tough as those Weltys, each packing a gun, and he whipped them with his

bare hands! Anybody who still thinks a man with that kind of guts would deal in back-shooting—or would ever need to—step out and say his piece!" Gib held his breath.

Nobody did. And such talk, he knew, would never be uttered again. A faint smile touched his lips.

Monica ran to him. She had known all along that a fight like this, waged by Brent and by Brent alone, was the only way the boy could change the town's opinion of him. It was why she had been angry with Gib for stopping the fight in the school yard. And it must have been hard on her, trying to hold Gib back, later, letting the boy go to buck the odds of what he had tackled here. Now her cheeks were pale and tear-streaked, but she was smiling happily.

"Gib, I think I'll be moving into that house soon with you and Brent!" Monica said.

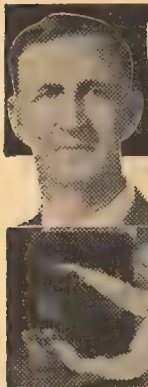
She went on to Brent. His arms opened to her. They stood a moment, very close together.

Sam Marvin appeared. "Looks like everybody was all wrong about the boy. And what a lift this will give our ticket in the election!"

Gib studied him coldly. "I'll take that senatorship in the fall, Sam, because the county will have a new sheriff. Brent Herrick! He'll need no help from you, or anybody, to win the job. Or what comes after that, either. And neither this county nor all of Arizona will be big enough to hold him down!"

There was no doubt in Gib's mind but that Monica had returned for good—and the thought of a woman in the house again made all the trouble of the past seem worthwhile.

He started after Brent and Monica stepping high in spite of his aching leg. When a man had such a son, he owned the whole world. ♠ ♠ ♠



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Renegade Heads Roll!

By LEE FLOREN

The deadly Espinosas spread murder with a smile until Tom Tobin rode a dollar-sign trail—to the door of two-headed death!

DURING THE Spring of 1863 the two Espinosa brothers, who reportedly had sworn to kill six hundred white men, held up a teamster bound for Santa Fe. They looted the wagon, tied the teamster behind the rig, and then turned the team loose, whipping the horses to make them run away. The unfortunate driver, tied by his hands to the rear of his wagon was dragged until a farmer saw the runaway, and stopped the team.

"Who did this to you, driver?"

"Them Espinosa boys did it. They robbed me an' took to the timber. I was haulin' this stuff into Santa Fe an' they stopped me—"

The farmer took the injured man to his cabin and then sent word to Fort Garland. A detachment of fifteen soldiers was sent out to pursue the brothers.

According to legend, the two brothers, angered because of their losses during the Mexican War, had sworn, in their will, to kill six hundred U. S. citizens in revenge.

The soldiers, strangely, found them at home. The brothers grabbed rifles and killed one soldier before breaking free and losing themselves in the timber.

That summer they murdered about thirty people. One would sneak in close to the door of a cabin, the other would call the occupant outside. And the axe would come down, neatly splitting the unsuspecting victim's head.

Or else the prospective host, coming to his door, would be blasted in the face with a Winchester or shotgun.

They made fools out of the soldiers. The Espinosas knew every canyon and peak in that section of New Mexico and Colorado and they skilfully used this knowledge. By murdering and looting, they lived in the open—two beasts gone wild. At last some miners from Leadville, weary of their antics and disgusted with the Fort Garland soldiers, banded and set after the brothers.

Tireless and tough, the miners tracked their prey. Across South Park the Espinosas trekked, then into Cripple Creek Basin. There, on what is now called Espinosa Peak, they fought it out, and the older brother was killed.

The younger one went into Mexico, returned with an obliging cousin and again they went to work, this time with a more savage intensity.

John Evans, then governor of New Mexico, demanded that Colonel Tappan, commander of Fort Garland, capture the two killers. His new territory was going through a period of bloody terror, a time when men

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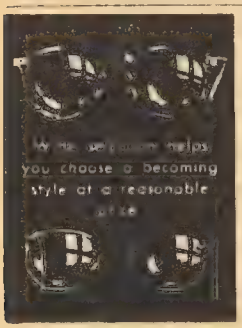

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dared not go out alone at night nor answer a knock at their doors.

"There is twenty-five hundred dollars in reward money for the killing of those two killer-dogs," the governor said. "You have soldiers, colonel. Send them out and bring in the Espinosas."

The colonel pointed out that for months he had had soldiers in the mountains after the Espinosas and they had not even seen the killer-pair. Then the army officer's ruddy face lighted with a new hope. One man remained who might erase the Espinosa scourge.

His voice was sure.

"I'll send for Tom Tobin, Governor."

"Tom Tobin? Who is he?"

Tom Tobin, the commandant explained, was about the last of the buckskin men—the hardy, tough trappers who had developed the San Luis Valley. He could trail a cloud across the sky, the army man insisted.

"Send for him."

So they sent for Tom Tobin. Tobin, at that time, was a young man—he knew Kit Carson and "Broken Hand" Fitzpatrick—and he was the last of the trappers. When he died in 1904, he was an old man who had outlived his fellow-trappers by almost half a century.

"There is a reward of twenty-five hundred, Mr. Tobin."

Tom Tobin chewed thoughtfully. "Will you make sure I git the reward, colonel?" Never any doubt about his inability to track down the Espinosa killers! But the colonel reacted calmly to ensure Tobin's interest in killing the Espinosas.

"The reward is posted, sir."

"Alive or dead?"

"Dead, preferably."

"All right, mister—dead they'll be."

For the first time the Espinosas were facing somebody of their own mettle. Tom Tobin carrying a pack and his rifle, took to the brush. The army sent a dozen or so soldiers to help him. Tobin soon lost the soldiers and went on alone. He kept watching the sky. Within a few days, he saw crows circling and landing across a gully. This sign assured him.

He knew, then, he had spotted a camp. Was it the camp of the Espinosas? Sneaking through brush, wading across a creek, he advanced—a timberman moving with the stealth of a timber wolf.

He shot the first Espinosa and killed him immediately. The second fled into the brush, and another ball took him down, breaking his spine. And then Tom Tobin stood over the two dead bandits and poured powder into his long-gun.

He gave this matter complete thought. He could not pack out the bodies. So, with his knife, he neatly severed the heads free, then buried the bodies. Putting the heads in his pack, he trekked back to the army base.

"Here they are," he said, and he let the gory heads tumble out on the floor. "Where's my reward?" He wanted his cash immediately.

"That will come in due matter of time. First the identity of these killers has to be substantiated and then the legal procedure will take some time and then the Governor will have to—"

"Long rigamarole," the buckskin said sarcastically. "If I had been as slow comin' when you sent for me as they seem to be payin' this bounty them killers would be alive forever! They's too many laws nowadays, Colonel."

"I'll do my best. I'll contact the Governor immediately. We'll put these heads in alcohol to keep them."

Tom Tobin said, "Get my reward as soon as you can."

As it was, he received only fifteen hundred dollars, and this he finally acquired only after going to court. His claim was pressed for four decades, and it was paid a few dollars at a time.

When he died, he still had a thousand dollars due him. ♠ ♠ ♠

(Continued from page 56)

Childress kept his eyes on the star as he ran the pin through and fastened it. Then he brought his gaze up slowly . . . and too late. He saw the gun jump in Briggs' hand and the slug hit him high in the shoulder, spinning him around. He fell to his knees and rolled from the sidewalk, struggling to bring his own Colt free of the holster. A slug tore into a board near his head and he twisted away from it and swung up with the gun. He shot Briggs twice, and Briggs staggered back and groped wildly for the wall. He found it and rested one shoulder against it and made a last effort to bring up the gun. His eyes were half-shut now and his mouth hung open, and he jerked crazily when Childress shot him again. He dropped the gun and tried to check his fall, but his legs went suddenly limber and he pitched dead weight to the sidewalk.

Childress pulled himself up and climbed onto the walk. He slipped the Colt back in the holster and for a long minute stood staring at the huddled shape of the foreman. Inside McKenna's it was silent, but when he pushed open the doors the noise rose up around him. He didn't see the look on Anderson's face. A man slapped him on the back and another one took his arm, and he found himself being shoved toward the bar. "Set 'em up," someone yelled, and Childress said, "It's been a long time," to no one in particular . . . and no one heard him. Not even the Doc, who was close enough to shake his hand. ♠ ♠ ♠

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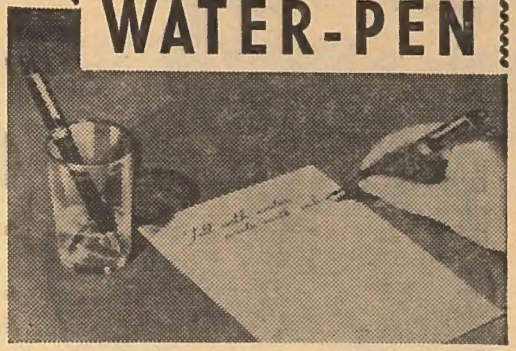

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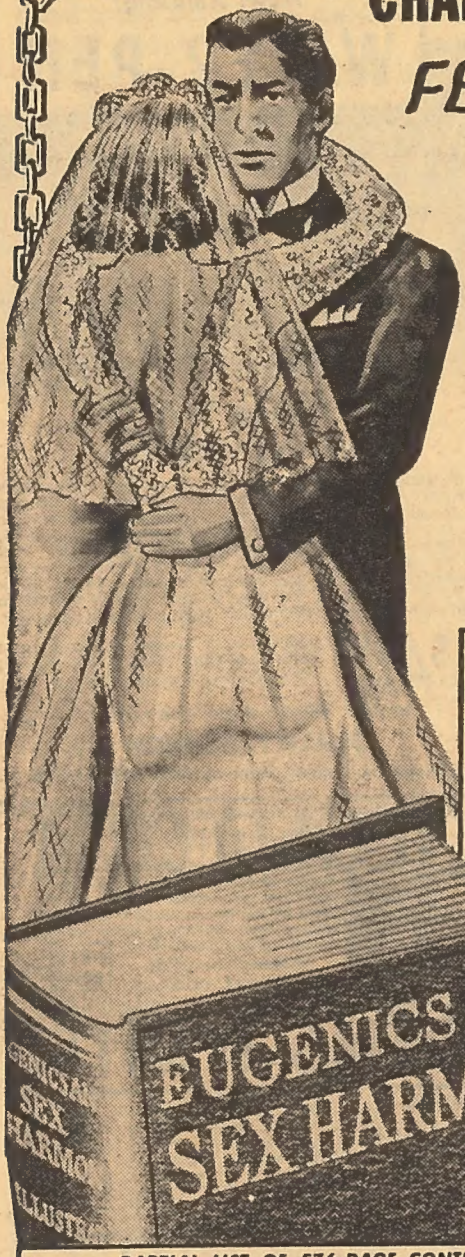

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